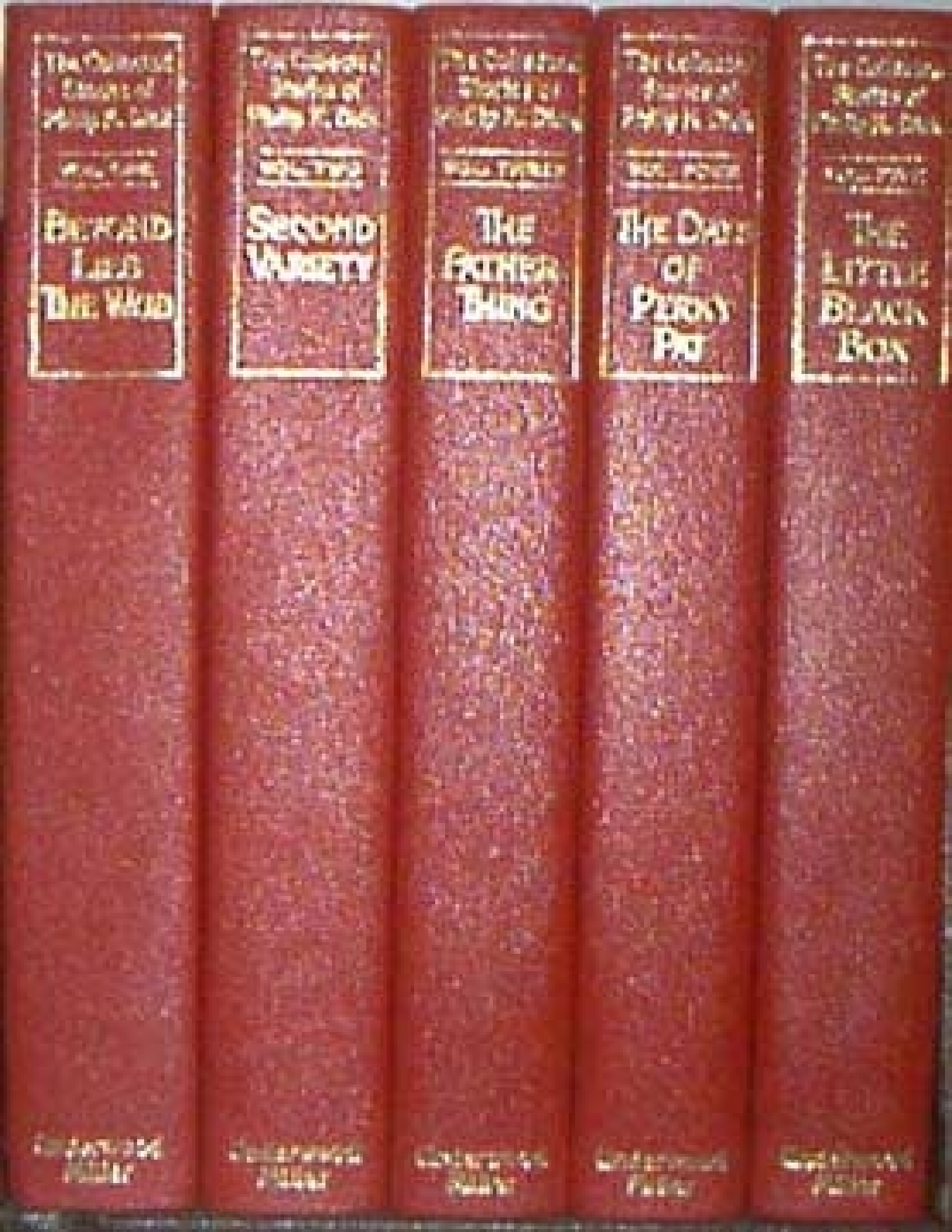
Richard Laid the Word
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The Collected Stories of Philip K. Dick Vol. 1
by Philip K Dick
IN MEMORY OF PHILIP K. DICK
1928-1982

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Preface

By Philip K. Dick

I will define science fiction, first, by saying what sf is *not.* It cannot be defined as "a story (or novel or play) set in the future," since there exists such a thing as space adventure, which is set in the future but is not sf: it is just that: adventures, fights and wars in the future in space involving super-advanced technology. Why, then, is it not science fiction? It would seem to be, and Doris Lessing (e.g.) supposes that it is. However, space adventure *lacks the distinct new idea* that is the essential ingredient. Also, there can be science fiction set in the present: the alternate world story or novel. So if we separate sf from the future and also from ultra-advanced technology, what then do we have that *can* be called sf?

We have a fictitious world; that is the first step: it is a society that does not in fact exist, but is predicated on our known society; that is, our known society acts as a jumping-off point for it; the society advances out of our own in some way, perhaps orthogonally, as with the alternate world story or novel. It is our world dislocated by some kind of mental effort on the part of the author, our world transformed into that which it is not or not yet. This world must differ from the given in at least one way, and this one way must be sufficient to give rise to events that could not occur in our society — or in any known society present or past. There must be a coherent idea involved in this dislocation; that is, the dislocation must be a conceptual one, not merely a trivial or bizarre one — *this* is the essence of science fiction, the conceptual dislocation within the society so that as a result a new society is generated in the author's mind, transferred to paper, and from paper it occurs as a convulsive shock in the reader's mind, *the shock of dysrecognition.* He knows that it is not his actual world that he is reading about.

Now, to separate science fiction from fantasy. This is impossible to do, and a moment's thought will show why. Take psionics; take mutants such as we find in Ted Sturgeon's wonderful *MORE THAN HUMAN.* If the reader believes that such mutants could exist, then he will view Sturgeon's novel

as science fiction. If, however, he believes that such mutants are, like wizards and dragons, not possible, nor will ever be possible, then he is reading a fantasy novel. Fantasy involves that which general opinion regards as impossible; science fiction involves that which general opinion regards as possible under the right circumstances. This is in essence a judgment-call, since what is possible and what is not possible is not objectively known but is, rather, a subjective belief on the part of the author and of the reader.

Now to define *good* science fiction. The conceptual dislocation — the new idea, in other words — must be truly new (or a new variation on an old one) and it must be intellectually stimulating to the reader; it must invade his mind and wake it up to the possibility of something he had not up to then thought of. Thus "good science fiction" is a value term, not an objective thing, and yet, I think, there really is such a thing, objectively, as good science fiction.

I think Dr. Willis McNelly at the California State University at Fullerton put it best when he said that the true protagonist of an sf story or novel is an idea and not a person. If it is *good* sf the idea is new, it is stimulating, and, probably most important of all, it sets off a chain-reaction of ramification-ideas in the mind of the reader; it so-to-speak unlocks the reader's mind so that that mind, like the author's, begins to create. Thus sf is creative and it inspires creativity, which mainstream fiction by-and-large does not do. We who read sf (I am speaking as a reader now, not a writer) read it because we love to experience this chain-reaction of ideas being set off in our minds by something we read, something with a new idea in it; hence the very best science fiction ultimately winds up being a collaboration between author and reader, in which both create — and *enjoy* doing it: joy is the essential and final ingredient of science fiction, the joy of discovery of newness.

(in a letter) May 14,1981

Foreword

By Steven Owen Godersky

There is a current coin-of-phrase that touts Philip K. Dick as the greatest science fiction mind *on any planet.* Well, that and a trajectory to Lagrange-5 are hyperbolic. The returns simply are not all in. The best is a tale that has yet to be written.

There are some things, though, that might make us feel a little more secure about Phil Dick's contribution to *this* planet, not that his reputation needs any particular help today. The scope, the integrity and the intellectual magnificence of Phil's work are internationally revered. He is regarded by many as the most "serious" of the modern science fiction authors, and the interest in his works has continued to mount since his untimely death in 1982. His reputation has been further enhanced by a growing body of scholarly criticism. If we take a measured look at his accomplishments there are three powerful themes that permeate almost every novel and story.

The first and most prominent theme today, can be seen in Phil's watershed work on the question of what divides humanity from all the intricacies of its creations. This is part of the central preoccupation of all consequential writers. But Phil rephrased the question *What does it mean to be human?* to *What is it like not to be human?* He posed the problem intellectually, after his fashion, but then he made *us feel* his answers. In the best and really highest tradition of Mary Shelley he struck on empathy as the difference; in his own word, *caritas.* I do not have to be a futurist to predict that both his search and his discovery will become ever more important to us as we rush along the strange road that science calls progress.

Phil's second theme is one of perspective; what I have come to think of as the care and feeding of scale-model gods. Though the arena of his ideas was so very large, what he trusted was, he once wrote, "very small." In a literary era of superstars and superheroes Phil reminds us that our

aspirations and abilities are not so different from, *and not less important than*, those of the great and powerful.

Think of Tung Chien in *Faith of Our Fathers*, and Ragel Gumm in *Time Out of Joint.* Their prosaic drudgery proves central to the fate of their worlds. Recall Herb Ellis in *Prominent Author,* an ordinary guy rewrites the Old Testament for inch-tall goatherds. Reflect on the significance of Herb Sousa's gumballs in *Holy Quarrel;* on the moral influence of wub-fur, in *NotBy Its Cover,* and the battle with the sentient pinball machine in *Return Match.* Small is written large. Large is written small. Shop clerks and storekeepers are just as likely as warlords and messiahs to be at Dick's ontological foci. Old Mrs. Berthelsen, in *Captive Market,* possesses the ultimate secret of time and space, and uses it to sell vegetables out of a wagon.

When reading Dick you don't much see mile-long spaceships flaming into the sun. What you do see is one broken-down robot in a ditch. Or, more frightening, one butterfly trapped in a time warp. In Phil Dick's stories, we see that everything, human or otherwise, is connected, everyone is important; what causes pain to one causes pain to all. As John Brunner points out, it certainly caused pain to Phil himself.

Phil Dick's third major theme is his fascination with war and his fear and hatred of it. One hardly sees critical mention of it, yet it is as integral to his body of work as oxygen is to water.

Perhaps Dick, who began his writing career in Berkeley, California, absorbed the sensibilities of a town that had a carefully nurtured liberal commitment. Perhaps Joe McCarthy and the Korean War sensitized a beginning writer's imagination. We know little of his juvenile years during the Second World War. But we can identify, early and consistently, a mistrust of the military mentality, a fear of what he had seen of the total war machine on *either* side. He had a great disinclination to accept the slogans of the period that supported the ends over the means. Victory at all cost for Democracy, for Freedom, for the Flag are hollow aphorisms when the price

of victory is totalitarian submission to a heartless military bureaucracy: Phil feared this particular future for all of us.

From Phil's earliest stories, *The Defenders, The Variable Man, A Surface Raid* and *To Serve the Master,* to his later fiction, such as *Faith of Our Fathers,* and *The Exit Door Leads In,* the winners and the losers show their humanity largely in their rejection of warfare and aggression. For Dick, the only acceptable struggle was against the evil he recognized as "the forces of dissolution." Phil Dick was anti-military long before it became fashionable in the Sixties. He continued, through his whole career, to value humanity and its foibles, no matter how small and vulnerable, over the organized terror of the modern state, no matter how expedient.

So here it is; a look into an eclectic and vigorous mind. This indispensable collection of Phil Dick's less than novel-length fiction may disturb you. It may frighten you, because some of Phil's people live very close to home. But these stories will not leave you unchanged. A strange wind may blow through your door late at night, and the shadows of familiar objects may quiver in the light. Is some Palmer Eldritch figure hurrying now to approach our world? Even if you're not a pre-cog, don't say you weren't warned.

Introduction

By Roger Zelazny

When I was approached to write this introduction I declined. It had nothing to do with my attitude toward Phil Dick's work. It was, rather, because I felt that I had already said everything I had to say on the subject. It was then pointed out to me that I had said these things in a variety of different places. Even if I had nothing to add, a judicious rehashing in a place such as this might do a service for readers who, in all likelihood, hadn't seen or heard it all before.

So I thought about it. I also looked at some of the things I had written earlier. What might be worth repeating, what worth adding, after this time? I had only met Phil on a few occasions, in California and in France; and it had almost been by accident that we had once fallen into collaborating on a book. During our collaboration we had exchanged letters and spoken often on the telephone. I liked him and I was very impressed by his work. His sense of humor generally came through in our phone conversations. I remember once when he mentioned some royalty statements he'd just received. He'd said, "I've gotten so-and-so many hundred in France, so-and-so many hundred in Germany, so-and-so many hundred in Spain… . Gee! this sounds like the catalog aria from *Don Giovanni!"* It was always a more immediate form of verbal wit than the cosmic ironies he played with in his fiction.

I'd said something about his humor before. I'd also remarked on the games he played with consensus reality. I'd even generalized a bit about his characters. But why paraphrase when after all these years I've finally found a legitimate reason for quoting myself?

These characters are often victims, prisoners, manipulated men and women. It is generally doubtful whether they will leave the world with less evil in it than they found there. But you never know. They try. They are usually at bat in the last half of the ninth inning with the tying run on base,

two men out, two strikes and three balls riding, with the game being called on account of rain at any second. But then, what is rain? Or a ballpark?

The worlds through which Phil Dick's characters move are subject to cancellation or revision without notice. Reality is approximately as dependable as a politician's promise. Whether it is a drug, a time-warp, a machine or an alien entity responsible for the bewildering shifting of situations about his people, the result is the same: Reality, of the capital "R" variety, has become as relative a thing as the dryness of our respective Martinis. Yet the struggle goes on, the fight continues. Against what? Ultimately, Powers, Principalities, Thrones, and Dominations, often contained in hosts who are themselves victims, prisoners, manipulated men and women.

All of which sounds like grimly serious fare. Wrong. Strike the "grimly," add a comma and the following: but one of the marks of Phil Dick's mastery lies in the tone of his work. He is possessed of a sense of humor for which I am unable to locate an appropriate adjective. Wry, grotesque, slapstick, satirical, ironic… . None of them quite fits to the point of generality, though all may be found without looking too far. His characters take pratfalls at the most serious moments; pathetic irony may invade the most comic scene. It is a rare and estimable quality to direct such a show successfully.

I'd said that in *PHILIP K. DICK: ELECTRIC SHEPHERD* (edited by Bruce Gillespie, Norstrilia Press, 1975), and I still agree with it.

It is good now to see that Phil is finally getting some of the attention he deserved, both critically and at the popular level. My main regret is that it comes so late. He was often broke when I knew him, past the struggling author age but still struggling to make ends meet. I was heartened that for his last year or so he finally enjoyed financial security and even a measure of affluence. The last time I saw him he actually seemed happy and looked a bit relaxed. This was back when *Bladerunner* was being filmed, and we spent dinner and a long evening just talking, joking, reminiscing.

Much has been made of his later mysticism. I can't speak with firsthand knowledge of everything he might have believed, partly because it seemed to keep changing and partly because it was often difficult to know when he was kidding and when he was serious. My main impression from a number of conversations, though, was that he played at theology the way other people might play at chess problems, that he liked asking the classic science fiction writer's question — "What if?" — of anything he came across in the way of religious and philosophical notions. It was obviously a dimension of his work, and I've often wondered where another ten years would have taken his thinking. Impossible to guess now, really.

I recall that, like James Blish, he was fascinated by the problem of evil, and its juxtaposition with the sometime sweetness of life. I'm sure he wouldn't mind my quoting from the last letter I received from him (dated 10 April 1981):

Two items were presented to me for my inspection within a period of fifteen minutes: first, a copy of *WIND IN THE WILLOWS,* which I had never read… . A moment after I looked it over someone showed me a two-page photograph in the current *Time* of the attempted assassination of the President. There the wounded, there the Secret Service man with the Uzi machine gun, there all of them on the assassin. My brain had to try to correlate *WIND IN THE WILLOWS* and that photograph. It could not. It never will be able to. I brought the Grahame book home and sat reading it while they tried to get the Columbia to lift off, in vain, as you know. This morning when I woke up I could not think at all; not even weird thoughts, such as assail one upon rising — no thoughts, just a blank. As if my own computers had, in my brain, ceased speaking to one another, like at the Cape. It is hard to believe that the scene of the attempted assassination and *WIND IN THE WILLOWS* are part of the same universe. Surely one of them is not real. Mr. Toad sculling a little boat down the stream, and the man with the Uzi… . It is futile to try to make the universe add up. But I guess we must go on anyhow.

I felt at the time I received it that that tension, that moral bafflement, was a capsule version of a feeling which informed much of his writing. It is

not a thing that was ever actually resolved for him; he seemed too sophisticated to trust any pat answer. He'd said a lot of things in a lot of places over the years, but the statement I most remember, which most fits the man I used to talk with, is one I quoted in my foreword to Greg Rickman's first interview volume, *PHILIP K. DICK: IN HIS OWN WORDS* (Fragments West/Valentine Press, 1984). It was from a 1970 letter Phil had written to *SF Commentary:*

I know only one thing about my novels. In them, again and again, this minor man asserts himself in all his hasty, sweaty strength. In the ruins of Earth's cities he is busily constructing a little factory that turns out cigars or imitation artifacts that say, "Welcome to Miami, the pleasure center of the world." In *A. Lincoln, Simulacrum* he operates a little business that produces corny electronic organs — and, later on, human-like robots which ultimately become more of an irritation than a threat. Everything is on a small scale. Collapse is enormous; the positive little figure outlined against the universal rubble is, like Tagomi, Runciter, Molinari, gnat-sized in scope, finite in what he can do… and yet in some sense great. I really do not know why. I simply believe in him and I love him. He will prevail. There is nothing else. At least nothing else that matters. That we should be concerned about. Because if he is there, like a tiny father-figure, everything is all right.

Some reviewers have found "bitterness" in my writing. I am surprised, because my mood is one of trust. Perhaps they are bothered by the fact that what I trust is so very small. They want something vaster. I have news for them: there is nothing vaster. Nothing *more,* I should say. But really, how much do we have to have? Isn't Mr. Tagomi enough? I know it counts. I am satisfied.

I suppose I've recalled it twice now because I like to think of that small element of trust, of idealism, in Phil's writings. Perhaps I'm imposing a construction, though, in doing this. He was a complex person, and I've a feeling he left a lot of different people with a lot of different impressions. This in mind, the best I can render of the man I knew and liked — mostly at long distance — is obviously only a crude sketch, but it's the best I have to

show. And since much of this piece is self-plagiarism, I feel no guilt in closing with something else I've said before:

The subjective response… when a Philip Dick book has been finished and put aside is that, upon reflection, it does not seem so much that one holds the memory of a story; rather, it is the after effects of a poem rich in metaphor that seem to remain.

This I value, partly because it does defy a full mapping, but mainly because that which is left of a Phil Dick story when the details have been forgotten is a thing which comes to me at odd times and offers me a feeling or a thought; therefore, a thing which leaves me richer for having known it.

It is gratifying to know that he is being acclaimed and remembered with fetidness in many places. I believe it will last. I wish it had come a lot sooner.

Roger Zelazny

October, 1986

Stability

Robert Benton slowly spread his wings, flapped them several times and sailed majestically off the roof and into the darkness.

He was swallowed up by the night at once. Beneath him, hundreds of tiny dots of light betokened other roofs, from which other persons flew. A violet hue swam close to him, then vanished into the black. But Benton was in a different sort of mood, and the idea of night races did not appeal to him. The violet hue came close again and waved invitingly. Benton declined, swept upward into the higher air.

After a while he leveled off and allowed himself to coast on air currents that came up from the city beneath, the City of Lightness. A wonderful, exhilarating feeling swept through him. He pounded his huge, white wings together, flung himself in frantic joy into the small clouds that drifted past, dived at the invisible floor of the immense black bowl in which he flew, and at last descended toward the lights of the city, his leisure time approaching an end.

Somewhere far down a light more bright than the others winked at him: the Control Office. Aiming his body like an arrow, his white wings folded about him, he headed toward it. Down he went, straight and perfect. Barely a hundred feet from the light he threw his wings out, caught the firm air about him, and came gently to rest on a level roof.

Benton began to walk until a guide light came to life and he found his way to the entrance door by its beam. The door slid back at the pressure of his fingertips and he stepped past it. At once he began to descend, shooting downward at increasing speed. The small elevator suddenly stopped and he strode out into the Controller’s Main Office.

“Hello,” the Controller said, “take off your wings and sit down.”

Benton did so, folding them neatly and hanging them from one of a row of small hooks along the wall. He selected the best chair in sight and headed toward it.

"Ah," the Controller smiled, "you value comfort."

"Well," Benton answered, "I don't want it to go to waste."

The Controller looked past his visitor and through the transparent plastic walls. Beyond were the largest single rooms in the City of Lightness. They extended as far as his eyes could see, and farther. Each was —

"What did you want to see me about?" Benton interrupted. The Controller coughed and rattled some metal paper-sheets.

"As you know," he began, "Stability is the watchword. Civilization has been climbing for centuries, especially since the twenty-fifth century. It is a law of nature, however, that civilization must either go forward or fall backward; it cannot stand still."

"I know that," Benton said, puzzled. "I also know the multiplication table. Are you going to recite that, too?"

The Controller ignored him.

"We have, however, broken that law. One hundred years ago —"

One hundred years ago! It hardly seemed as far back as that when Eric Freidenburg of the States of Free Germany stood up in the International Council Chamber and announced to the assembled delegates that mankind had at last reached its peak. Further progress forward was impossible. In the last few years, only *two* major inventions has been filed. After that, they had all watched the big graphs and charts, seen the lines going down and down, according to their squares, until they dipped into nothing. The great well of human ingenuity had run dry, and then Eric had stood up and said

the thing everyone knew, but was afraid to say. Naturally, since it had been made known in a formal fashion, the Council would have to begin work on the problem.

There were three ideas of solution. One of them seemed more humane than the other two. This solution was eventually adopted. It was — Stabilization!

There was great trouble at first when the people learned about it, and mass riots took place in many leading cities. The stock market crashed, and the economy of many countries went out of control. Food prices rose, and there was mass starvation. War broke out… for the first time in three hundred years! But Stabilization had begun. Dissenters were destroyed, radicals were carted off. It was hard and cruel but seemed to be the only answer. At last the world settled down to a rigid state, a controlled state in which there could be no change, either backward or forward.

Each year every inhabitant took a difficult, week-long examination to test whether or not he was backsliding. All youths were given fifteen years of intensive education. Those who could not keep up with the others simply disappeared. Inventions were inspected by Control Offices to make certain that they could not upset Stability. If it seemed that they might —

“And that is why we cannot allow your invention to be put into use,” the Controller explained to Benton. “I am sorry.”

He watched Benton, saw him start, the blood drain from his face, his hands tremble.

“Come now,” he said kindly, “don’t take it so hard; there are other things to do. After all, you are not in danger of the Cart!”

But Benton only stared. At last he said,

“But you don’t understand: I have no invention. I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“No invention!” the Controller exclaimed. “But I was here the day you entered it yourself! I saw you sign the statement of ownership! You handed *me* the model!”

He stared at Benton. Then he pressed a stud on his desk and said into a small circle of light, “Send me up the information on number 34500-D, please.”

A moment passed, and then a tube appeared in the circle of light. The Controller lifted the cylindrical object out and passed it to Benton.

“You’ll find your signed statement there,” he said, “and it has your fingerprints in the print squares. Only you could have made them.”

Numbly, Benton opened the tube and took out the papers inside. He studied them a few moments, and then slowly put them back and handed the tube to the Controller.

“Yes,” he said, “that’s my writing, and those are certainly my prints. But I don’t understand, I never invented a thing in my life, and I’ve never been here before! What is this invention?”

“What is it!” the Controller echoed, amazed. “Don’t you know?”

Benton shook his head. “No, I do not,” he said slowly.

“Well, if you want to find out about it, you’ll have to go down to the Offices. All I can tell you is that the plans you sent us have been denied rights by the Control Board. I’m only a spokesman. You’ll have to take it up with them.”

Benton got up and walked to the door. As with the other, this one sprang open to his touch and he went on through into the Control Offices. As the

door closed behind him the Controller called angrily, “I don’t know what you’re up to, but you know the penalty for upsetting Stability!”

“I’m afraid Stability is already upset,” Benton answered and went on.

The Offices were gigantic. He stared down from the catwalk on which he stood, for below him a thousand men and women worked at whizzing, efficient machines. Into the machines they were feeding reams of cards. Many of the people worked at desks, typing out sheets of information, filling charts, putting cards away, decoding messages. On the walls stupendous graphs were constantly being changed. The very air was alive with the vitalness of the work being conducted, the hum of the machines, the tap-tap of the typewriters, and the mumble of voices all merged together in a quiet, contented sound. And this vast machine, which cost countless dollars a day to keep running so smoothly, had a word: Stability!

Here, the thing that kept their world together lived. This room, these hard working people, the ruthless man who sorted cards into the pile marked “for extermination” were all functioning together like a great symphony orchestra. One person off key, one person out of time, and the entire structure would tremble. But no one faltered. No one stopped and failed at his task. Benton walked down a flight of steps to the desk of the information clerk.

“Give me the entire information on an invention entered by Robert Benton, 34500-D,” he said. The clerk nodded and left the desk. In a few minutes he returned with a metal box.

“This contains the plans and a small working model of the invention,” he stated. He put the box on the desk and opened it. Benton stared at the contents. A small piece of intricate machinery sat squatly in the center. Underneath was a thick pile of metal sheets with diagrams on them. “Can I take this?” Benton asked.

“If you are the owner,” the clerk replied. Benton showed his identification card, the clerk studied it and compared it with the data on the

invention. At last he nodded his approval, and Benton closed the box, picked it up and quickly left the building via a side exit.

The side exit let him out on one of the larger underground streets, which was a riot of lights and passing vehicles. He located his direction, and began to search for a communications car to take him home. One came along and he boarded it. After he had been traveling for a few minutes he began to carefully lift the lid of the box and peer inside at the strange model. “What have you got there, sir?” the robot driver asked.

“I wish I knew,” Benton said ruefully. Two winged flyers swooped by and waved at him, danced in the air for a second and then vanished. “Oh, fowl,” Benton murmured, “I forgot my wings.” Well, it was too late to go back and get them, the car was just then beginning to slow down in front of his house. After paying the driver he went inside and locked the door, something seldom done. The best place to observe the contents was in his “consideration” room, where he spent his leisure time while not flying. There, among his books and magazines he could observe the invention at ease.

The set of diagrams was a complete *puzzle* to him, and the model itself even more so. He stared at it from all angles, from underneath, from above. He tried to interpret the technical symbols of the diagrams, but all to no avail.

There was but one road now open to him. He sought out the “on” switch and clicked it.

For almost a minute nothing happened. Then the room about him began to waver and give way. For a moment it shook like a quantity of jelly. It hung steady for an instant, and then vanished.

He was falling through space like an endless tunnel, and he found himself twisting about frantically, grasping into the blackness for something to take hold of. He fell for an interminable time, helplessly, frightened. Then he had landed, completely unhurt. Although it had seemed so, the fall

could not have been very long. His metallic clothes were not even ruffled. He picked himself up and looked about.

The place where he had arrived was strange to him. It was a field… such as he had supposed no longer to exist. Waving acres of grain waved in abundance everywhere. Yet, he was certain that in no place on earth did natural grain still grow. Yes, he was positive. He shielded his eyes and gazed at the sun, but it looked the same as it always had. He began to walk.

After an hour the wheat fields ended, but with their end came a wide forest. He knew from his studies that there were no forests left on earth. They had perished years before. Where was he, then?

He began to walk again, this time more quickly. Then he started to run. Before him a small hill rose and he raced to the top of it. Looking down the other side he stared in bewilderment. There was nothing there but a great emptiness. The ground was completely level and barren, there were no trees or any sign of life as far as his eyes could see, only the extensive bleached out land of death.

He started down the other side of the hill toward the plain. It was hot and dry under his feet, but he went forward anyway. He walked on, the ground began to hurt his feet — unaccustomed to long walking — and he grew tired. But he was determined to continue. Some small whisper within his mind compelled him to maintain his pace without slowing down.

“Don’t pick it up,” a voice said.

“I will,” he grated, half to himself, and stooped down.

Voice! From where! He turned quickly, but there was nothing to be seen. Yet the voice had come to him and it had seemed — for a moment — as if it were perfectly natural for voices to come from the air. He examined the thing he was about to pick up. It was a glass globe about as big around as his fist.

“You will destroy your valuable Stability,” the voice said.

“Nothing can destroy Stability,” he answered automatically. The glass globe was cool and nice against his palm. There was something inside, but heat from the glowing orb above him made it dance before his eyes, and he could not tell exactly what it was.

“You are allowing your mind to be controlled by evil things,” the voice said to him. “Put the globe down and leave.”

“Evil things?” he asked, surprised. It was hot, and he was beginning to feel thirsty. He started to thrust the globe inside his tunic.

“Don’t,” the voice ordered, “that is what it wants you to do.”

The globe was nice against his chest. It nestled there, cooling him off from the fierce heat of the sun. What was it the voice was saying?

“You were called here by it through time,” the voice explained. “You obey it now without question. I am its guardian, and ever since this time-world was created I have guarded it. Go away, and leave it as you found it.”

Definitely, it was too warm on the plain. He wanted to leave; the globe was now urging him to, reminding him of the heat from above, the dryness in his mouth, the tingling in his head. He started off, and as he clutched the globe to him he heard the wail of despair and fury from the phantom voice.

That was almost all he remembered. He did recall that he made his way back across the plain to the fields of grain, through them, stumbling and staggering, and at last to the spot where he had first appeared. The glass globe inside his coat urged him to pick up the small time machine from where he had left it. It whispered to him what dial to change, which button to press, which knob to set. Then he was falling again, falling back up the corridor of time, back, back to the graying mist from whence he had fallen, back to his own world.

Suddenly the globe urged him to stop. The journey through time was not yet complete: there was still something that he had to do.

“You say your name is Benton? What can I do for you?” the Controller asked. “You have never been here before, have you?”

He stared at the Controller. What did he mean? Why, he had just left the office! Or had he? What day was it? Where had he been? He rubbed his head dizzily and sat down in the big chair. The Controller watched him anxiously.

“Are you all right?” he asked. “Can I help you?”

“I’m all right,” Benton said. There was something in his hands.

“I want to register this invention to be approved by the Stability Council,” he said, and handed the time machine to the Controller.

“Do you have the diagrams of its construction?” the Controller asked.

Benton dug deeply into his pocket and brought out the diagrams. He tossed them on the Controller’s desk and laid the model beside them.

“The Council will have no trouble determining what it is,” Benton said. His head ached, and he wanted to leave. He got to his feet.

“I am going,” he said, and went out the side door through which he had entered. The Controller stared after him.

“Obviously,” the First Member of the Control Council said, “he had been using the thing. You say the first time he came he acted as if he had been there before, but on the second visit he had no memory of having entered an invention, or even having been there before?”

“Right,” the Controller said. “I thought it was suspicious at the time of the first visit, but I did not realize until he came the second time what the meaning was. Undoubtedly, he used it.”

“The Central Graph records that an unstabilizing element is about to come up,” the Second Member remarked. “I would wager that Mr. Benton is it.”

“A time machine!” the First Member said. “Such a thing can be dangerous. Did he have anything with him when he came the — ah — first time?”

“I saw nothing, except that he walked as if he were carrying something under his coat,” the Controller replied.

“Then we must act at once. He will have been able to set up a chain of circumstance by this time that our Stabilizers will have trouble in breaking. Perhaps we should visit Mr. Benton.”

Benton sat in his living room and stared. His eyes were set in a kind of glassy rigidness and he had not moved for some time. The globe had been talking to him, telling him of its plans, its hopes. Now it stopped suddenly.

“They are coming,” the globe said. It was resting on the couch beside him, and its faint whisper curled to his brain like a wisp of smoke. It had not actually spoken, of course, for its language was mental. But Benton heard.

“What shall I do?” he asked.

“Do nothing,” the globe said. “They will go away.” The buzzer sounded and Benton remained where he was. The buzzer sounded again, and Benton stirred restlessly. After a while the men went down the walk again and appeared to have departed.

“Now what?” Benton asked. The globe did not answer for a moment.

“I feel that the time is almost here,” it said at last. “I have made no mistakes so far, and the difficult part is past. The hardest was having you come through time. It took me years — the Watcher was clever. You almost didn’t answer, and it was not until I thought of the method of putting the machine in your hands that success was certain. Soon you shall release us from this globe. After such an eternity —”

There was a scraping and a murmur from the rear of the house, and Benton started up.

“They are coming in the back door!” he said. The globe rustled angrily. The Controller and the Council Members came slowly and warily into the room. They spotted Benton and stopped.

“We didn’t think that you were at home,” the First Member said. Benton turned to him.

“Hello,” he said. “I’m sorry that I didn’t answer the bell; I had fallen asleep. What can I do for you?”

Carefully, his hand reached out toward the globe, and it seemed almost as if the globe rolled under the protection of his palm.

“What have you there?” the Controller demanded suddenly. Benton stared at him, and the globe whispered in his mind.

“Nothing but a paperweight,” he smiled. “Won’t you sit down?” The men took their seats, and the First Member began to speak. “You came to see us twice, the first time to register an invention, the second time because we had summoned you to appear, as we could not allow the invention to be issued.”

“Well?” Benton demanded. “Is there something the matter with that?”

“Oh, no,” the Member said, “but what was for us your first visit was for *you* your second. Several things prove this, but I will not go into them just now. The thing that is important is that you still have the machine. This is a difficult problem. Where is the machine? It should be in your possession. Although we cannot force you to give it to us, we will obtain it eventually in one way or another.”

“That is true,” Benton said. But where *was* the machine? He had just left it at the Controller’s Office. Yet he had already picked it up and taken it into time, whereupon he had returned to the present and had returned it to the Controller’s Office!

“It has ceased to exist, a non-entity in a time-spiral,” the globe whispered to him, catching his thoughts. “The time-spiral reached its conclusion when you deposited the machine at the Office of Control. Now these men must leave so that we can do what must be done.”

Benton rose to his feet, placing the globe behind him. “I’m afraid that I don’t have the time machine,” he said. “I don’t even know where it is, but you may search for it if you like.”

“By breaking the laws, you have made yourself eligible for the Cart,” the Controller observed. “But we feel that you have done what you did without meaning to. We do not want to punish anyone without reason, we only desire to maintain Stability. Once that is upset, nothing matters.”

“You may search, but you won’t find it,” Benton said. The Members and the Controller began to look. They overturned chairs, searched under the carpets, behind pictures, in the walls, and they found nothing.

“You see, I was telling the truth,” Benton smiled, as they returned to the living room.

“You could have hidden it outside someplace,” the Member shrugged. “It doesn’t matter, however.”

The Controller stepped forward.

“Stability is like a gyroscope,” he said. “It is difficult to turn from its course, but once started it can hardly be stopped. We do not feel that you yourself have the strength to turn that gyroscope, but there may be others who can. That remains to be seen. We are going to leave now, and you will be allowed to end your own life, or wait here for the Cart. We are giving you the choice. You will be watched, of course, and I trust that you will make no attempt to flee. If so, then it will mean your immediate destruction. Stability must be maintained, at any cost.”

Benton watched them, and then laid the globe on the table. The Members looked at it with interest.

“A paperweight,” Benton said. “Interesting, don’t you think?” The Members lost interest. They began to prepare to leave. But the Controller examined the globe, holding it up to the light.

“A model of a city, eh?” he said. “Such fine detail.” Benton watched him.

“Why, it seems amazing that a person could ever carve so well,” the Controller continued. “What city is it? It looks like an ancient one such as Tyre or Babylon, or perhaps one far in the future. You know, it reminds me of an old legend.”

He looked at Benton intently as he went on.

“The legend says that once there was a very evil city, it was so evil that God made it small and shut it up in a glass, and left a watcher of some sort to see that no one came along and released the city by smashing the glass. It is supposed to have been lying for eternity, waiting to escape.

“And this is perhaps the model of it.” the Controller continued.

“Come on!” the First Member called at the door. “We must be going; there are lots of things left to do tonight.”

The Controller turned quickly to the Members. “Wait!” he said. “Don’t leave.”

He crossed the room to them, still holding the globe in his hand. “This would be a very poor time to leave,” he said, and Benton saw that while his face had lost most of its color, the mouth was set in firm lines. The Controller suddenly turned again to Benton.

“Trip through time; city in a glass globe! Does that mean anything?” The two Council Members looked puzzled and blank. “An ignorant man crosses time and returns with a strange glass,” the Controller said. “Odd thing to bring out of time, don’t you think?” Suddenly the First Member’s face blanched white. “Good God in Heaven!” he whispered. “The accursed city! That globe?” He stared at the round ball in disbelief. The Controller looked at Benton with an amused glance.

“Odd, how stupid we may be for a time, isn’t it?” he said. “But eventually we wake up. *Don’t touch it!”*

Benton slowly stepped back, his hands shaking.

“Well?” he demanded. The globe was angry at being in the Controller’s hand. It began to buzz, and vibrations crept down the Controller’s arm. He felt them, and took a firmer grip on the globe.

“I think it wants me to break it,” he said, “it wants me to smash it on the floor so that it can get out.” He watched the tiny spires and building tops in the murky mistiness of the globe, so tiny that he could cover them all with his fingers.

Benton dived. He came straight and sure, the way he had flown so many times in the air. Now every minute that he had hurtled about the warm blackness of the atmosphere of the City of Lightness came back to help him. The Controller, who had always been too busy with his work, always too piled up ahead to enjoy the airsports that the City was so proud of, went down at once. The globe bounced out of his hands and rolled across the room. Benton untangled himself and leaped up. As he raced after the small shiny sphere, he caught a glimpse of the frightened, bewildered faces of the Members, of the Controller attempting to get to his feet, face contorted with pain and horror.

The globe was calling to him, whispering to him. Benton stepped swiftly toward it, and felt a rising whisper of victory and then a scream of joy as his foot crushed the glass that imprisoned it.

The globe broke with a loud popping sound. For a time it lay there, then a mist began to rise from it. Benton returned to the couch and sat down. The mist began to fill the room. It grew and grew, it seemed almost like a living thing, so strangely did it shift and turn.

Benton began to drift into sleep. The mist crowded about him, curling over his legs, up to his chest, and finally milled about his face. He sat there, slumped over on the couch, his eyes closed, letting the strange, aged fragrance envelop him.

Then he heard the voices. Tiny and far away at first, the whisper of the globe multiplied countless times. A concert of whispering voices rose from the broken globe in a swelling crescendo of exultation. Joy of victory! He saw the tiny miniature city within the globe waver and fade, then change in size and shape. He could hear it now as well as see it. The steady throbbing of the machinery like a gigantic drum. The shaking and quivering of squat metal beings.

These beings were tended. He saw the slaves, sweating, stooped, pale men, twisting in their efforts to keep the roaring furnaces of steel and power happy. It seemed to swell before his eyes until the entire room was full of it,

and the sweating workmen brushed against him and around him. He was deafened by the raging power, the grinding wheels and gears and valves. Something was pushing against him, compelling him to move forward, forward to the City, and the mist gleefully echoed the new, victorious sounds of the freed ones.

When the sun came up he was already awake. The rising bell rang, but Benton had left his sleeping-cube some time before. As he fell in with the marching ranks of his companions, he thought he recognized familiar faces for an instant — men he had known someplace before. But at once the memory passed. As they marched toward the waiting machines, chanting the tuneless sounds their ancestors had chanted for centuries, and the weight of his bonus if the Machines saw fit — For had he not been tending *his* machine faithfully?

Roog

“Roog!” the dog said. He rested his paws on the top of the fence and looked around him.

The Roog came running into the yard.

It was early morning, and the sun had not really come up yet. The air was cold and gray, and the walls of the house were damp with moisture. The dog opened his jaws a little as he watched, his big black paws clutching the wood of the fence.

The Roog stood by the open gate, looking into the yard. He was a small Roog, thin and white, on wobbly legs. The Roog blinked at the dog, and the dog showed his teeth.

“Roog!” he said again. The sound echoed into the silent half darkness. Nothing moved nor stirred. The dog dropped down and walked back across the yard to the porch steps. He sat down on the bottom step and watched the Roog. The Roog glanced at him. Then he stretched his neck up to the window of the house, just above him. He sniffed at the window.

The dog came flashing across the yard. He hit the fence, and the gate shuddered and groaned. The Roog was walking quickly up the path, hurrying with funny little steps, mincing along. The dog lay down against the slats of the gate, breathing heavily, his red tongue hanging. He watched the Roog disappear.

The dog lay silently, his eyes bright and black. The day was beginning to come. The sky turned a little whiter, and from all around the sounds of people echoed through the morning air. Lights popped on behind shades. In the chilly dawn a window was opened.

The dog did not move. He watched the path.

In the kitchen Mrs. Cardossi poured water into the coffee pot. Steam rose from the water, blinding her. She set the pot down on the edge of the stove and went into the pantry. When she came back Alf was standing at the door of the kitchen. He put his glasses on.

"You bring the paper?" he said.

"It's outside."

Alf Cardossi walked across the kitchen. He threw the bolt on the back door and stepped out onto the porch. He looked into the gray, damp morning. At the fence Boris lay, black and furry, his tongue out.

"Put the tongue in," Alf said. The dog looked quickly up. His tail beat against the ground. "The tongue," Alf said. "Put the tongue in."

The dog and the man looked at one another. The dog whined. His eyes were bright and feverish.

"Roog!" he said softly.

"What?" Alf looked around. "Someone coming? The paperboy come?"

The dog stared at him, his mouth open.

"You certainly upset these days," Alf said. "You better take it easy. We both getting too old for excitement."

He went inside the house.

The sun came up. The street became bright and alive with color. The postman went along the sidewalk with his letters and magazines. Some children hurried by, laughing and talking.

About 11:00, Mrs. Cardossi swept the front porch. She sniffed the air, pausing for a moment.

“It smells good today,” she said. “That means it’s going to be warm.” In the heat of the noonday sun the black dog lay stretched out full length, under the porch. His chest rose and fell. In the cherry tree the birds were playing, squawking and chattering to each other. Once in a while Boris raised his head and looked at them. Presently he got to his feet and trotted down under the tree.

He was standing under the tree when he saw the two Roogs sitting on the fence, watching him.

“He’s big,” the first Roog said. “Most Guardians aren’t as big as this.”

The other Roog nodded, his head wobbling on his neck. Boris watched them without moving, his body stiff and hard. The Roogs were silent, now, looking at the big dog with his shaggy ruff of white around his neck.

“How is the offering urn?” the first Roog said. “Is it almost full?”

“Yes.” The other nodded. “Almost ready.”

“You, there!” the first Roog said, raising his voice. “Do you hear me? We’ve decided to accept the offering, this time. So you remember to let us in. No nonsense, now.”

“Don’t forget,” the other added. “It won’t be long.”

Boris said nothing.

The two Roogs leaped off the fence and went over together just beyond the walk. One of them brought out a map and they studied it.

“This area really is none too good for a first trial,” the first Roog said. “Too many Guardians… Now, the northside area —”

“*They* decided,” the other Roog said. “There are so many factors —”

“Of course.” They glanced at Boris and moved back farther from the fence. He could not hear the rest of what they were saying.

Presently the Roogs put their map away and went off down the path.

Boris walked over to the fence and sniffed at the boards. He smelled the sickly, rotten odor of Roogs and the hair stood up on his back.

That night when Alf Cardossi came home the dog was standing at the gate, looking up the walk. Alf opened the gate and went into the yard.

“How are you?” he said, thumping the dog’s side. “You stopped worrying? Seems like you been nervous of late. You didn’t used to be that way.”

Boris whined, looking intently up into the man’s face.

“You a good dog, Boris,” Alf said. “You pretty big, too, for a dog. You don’t remember long ago how you used to be only a little bit of a puppy.”

Boris leaned against the man’s leg.

“You a good dog,” Alf murmured. “I sure wish I knew what is on your mind.”

He went inside the house. Mrs. Cardossi was setting the table for dinner. Alf went into the living room and took his coat and hat off. He set his lunch pail down on the sideboard and came back into the kitchen.

“What’s the matter?” Mrs. Cardossi said.

“That dog got to stop making all that noise, barking. The neighbors going to complain to the police again.”

“I hope we don’t have to give him to your brother,” Mrs. Cardossi said, folding her arms. “But he sure goes crazy, especially on Friday morning, when the garbage men come.”

“Maybe he’ll calm down,” Alf said. He lit his pipe and smoked solemnly. “He didn’t used to be that way. Maybe he’ll get better, like he was.”

“We’ll see,” Mrs. Cardossi said.

The sun rose up, cold and ominous. Mist hung over all the trees and in the low places.

It was Friday morning.

The black dog lay under the porch, listening, his eyes wide and staring. His coat was stiff with hoarfrost and the breath from his nostrils made clouds of steam in the thin air. Suddenly he turned his head and leaped up.

From far off, a long way away, a faint sound came, a kind of crashing sound.

“Roog!” Boris cried, looking around. He hurried to the gate and stood up, his paws on top of the fence.

In the distance the sound came again, louder now, not as far away as before. It was a crashing, clanging sound, as if something were being rolled back, as if a great door were being opened

“Roog!” Boris cried. He stared up anxiously at the darkened windows above him. Nothing stirred, nothing.

And along the street the Roogs came. The Roogs and their truck moved along bouncing against the rough stones, crashing and whirring.

“Roog!” Boris cried, and he leaped, his eyes blazing. Then he became more calm. He settled himself down on the ground and waited, listening.

Out in front the Roogs stopped their truck. He could hear them opening the doors stepping down onto the sidewalk. Boris ran around in a little circle. He whined and his muzzle turned once again toward the house.

Inside the warm, dark bedroom, Mr. Cardossi sat up a little in bed and squinted at the clock.

“That damn dog,” he muttered. “That damn dog.” He turned his face toward the pillow and closed his eyes.

The Roogs were coming down the path, now. The first Roog pushed against the gate and the gate opened. The Roogs came into the yard. The dog backed away from them.

“Roog! Roog!” he cried. The horrid, bitter smell of Roogs came to his nose, and he turned away.

“The offering urn,” the first Roog said. “It is full, I think.” He smiled at the rigid, angry dog. “How very good of you,” he said

The Roogs came toward the metal can, and one of them took the lid from it.

“Roog! Roog!” Boris cried, huddled against the bottom of the porch steps. His body shook with horror. The Roogs were lifting up the big metal can, turning it on its side. The contents poured out onto the ground, and the

Roogs scooped the sacks of bulging, splitting paper together, catching at the orange peels and fragments, the bits of toast and egg shells.

One of the Roogs popped an egg shell into his mouth. His teeth crunched the egg shell.

"Roog!" Boris cried hopelessly, almost to himself. The Roogs were almost finished with their work of gathering up the offering. They stopped for a moment, looking at Boris.

Then, slowly, silently, the Roogs looked up, up the side of the house, along the stucco, to the window, with its brown shade pulled tightly down.

"ROOG!" Boris screamed, and he came toward them, dancing with fury and dismay. Reluctantly, the Roogs turned away from the window. They went out through the gate, closing it behind them.

"Look at him," the last Roog said with contempt, pulling his corner of the blanket up on his shoulder. Boris strained against the fence, his mouth open, snapping wddly. The biggest Roog began to wave his arms furiously and Boris retreated. He settled down at the bottom of the porch steps, his mouth still open, and from the depths of him an unhappy, terrible moan issued forth, a wail of misery and despair.

"Come on," the other Roog said to the lingering Roog at the fence.

They walked up the path.

"Well, except for these little places around the Guardians, this area is well cleared," the biggest Roog said. "I'll be glad when this particular Guardian is done. He certainly causes us a lot of trouble."

"Don't be impatient," one of the Roogs said. He grinned. "Our truck is full enough as it is. Let's leave something for next week."

All the Roogs laughed.

They went on up the path, carrying the offering in the dirty, sagging blanket.

The Little Movement

The man was sitting on the sidewalk, holding the box shut with his hands. Impatiently the lid of the box moved, straining up against his fingers.

"All right," the man murmured. Sweat rolled down his face, damp, heavy sweat. He opened the box slowly, holding his fingers over the opening. From inside a metallic drumming came, a low insistent vibration, rising frantically as the sunlight filtered into the box.

A small head appeared, round and shiny, and then another. More heads jerked into view, peering, craning to see. "I'm first," one head shrilled. There was a momentary squabble, then quick agreement.

The man sitting on the sidewalk lifted out the little metal figure with trembling hands. He put it down on the sidewalk and began to wind it awkwardly, thick-fingered. It was a brightly painted soldier with helmet and gun, standing at attention. As the man turned the key the little soldier's arms went up and down. It struggled eagerly.

Along the sidewalk two women were coming, talking together. They glanced down curiously at the man sitting on the sidewalk, at the box and the shiny figure in the man's hands.

"Fifty cents," the man muttered. "Get your child something to —"

"Wait!" a faint metallic voice came. "Not them!"

The man broke off abruptly. The two women looked at each other and then at the man and the little metal figure. They went hurriedly on.

The little soldier gazed up and down the street, at the cars, the shoppers. Suddenly it trembled, rasping in a low, eager voice.

The man swallowed. “Not the kid,” he said thickly. He tried to hold onto the figure, but metal fingers dug quickly into his hand. He gasped.

“Tell them to stop!” the figure shrilled. “Make them stop!” The metal figure pulled away and clicked across the sidewalk, its legs still and rigid.

The boy and his father slowed to a stop, looking down at it with interest. The sitting man smiled feebly; he watched the figure approach them, turning from side to side, its arms going up and down.

“Get something for your boy. An exciting playmate. Keep him company.”

The father grinned, watching the figure coming up to his shoe. The little soldier bumped into the shoe. It wheezed and clicked. It stopped moving.

“Wind it up!” the boy cried.

His father picked up the figure. “How much?”

“Fifty cents.” The salesman rose unsteadily, clutching the box against him. “Keep him company. Amuse him.”

The father turned the figure over. “You sure you want it, Bobby?”

“Sure! Wind it up!” Bobby reached for the little soldier. “Make it go!”

“I’ll buy it,” the father said. He reached into his pocket and handed the man a dollar bill.

Clumsily, staring away, the salesman made change.

The situation was excellent.

The little figure lay quietly, thinking everything over. All circumstances had conspired to bring about optimum solution. The Child might not have wanted to stop, or the Adult might not have had any money. Many things might have gone wrong; it was awful even to think about them. But everything had been perfect.

The little figure gazed up in pleasure, where it lay in the back of the car. It had correctly interpreted certain signs: the Adults were in control, and so the Adults had money. They had power, but their power made it difficult to get to them. Their power, and their size. With the Children it was different. *They* were small, and it was easier to talk to them. They accepted everything they heard, and they did what they were told. Or so it was said at the factory.

The little metal figure lay, lost in dreamy, delicious thoughts.

The boy's heart was beating quickly. He ran upstairs and pushed the door open. After he had closed the door carefully he went to the bed and sat down. He looked down at what he held in his hands.

"What's your name?" he said. "What are you called?"

The metal figure did not answer.

"I'll introduce you around. You must get to know everybody. You'll like it here."

Bobby laid the figure down on the bed. He ran to the closet and dragged out a bulging carton of toys.

"This is Bonzo," he said. He held up a pale stuffed rabbit. "And Fred." He turned the rubber pig around for the soldier to see. "And Teddo, of course. This is Teddo."

He carried Teddo to the bed and laid him beside the soldier. Teddo lay silent, gazing up at the ceiling with glassy eyes. Teddo was a brown bear, with wisps of straw poking out of his joints.

“And what shall we call you?” Bobby said. “I think we should have a council and decide.” He paused, considering. “I’ll wind you up so we can all see how you work.”

He began to wind the figure carefully, turning it over on its face. When the key was tight he bent down and set the figure on the floor.

“Go on,” Bobby said. The metal figure stood still. Then it began to whirr and click. Across the floor it went, walking with stiff jerks. It changed directions suddenly and headed toward the door. At the door it stopped. Then it turned to some building blocks lying about and began to push them into a heap.

Bobby watched with interest. The little figure struggled with the blocks, piling them into a pyramid. At last it climbed up onto the blocks and turned the key in the lock.

Bobby scratched his head, puzzled. “Why did you do that?” he said. The figure climbed back down and came across the room toward Bobby, clicking and whirring. Bobby and the stuffed animals regarded it with surprise and wonder. The figure reached the bed and halted.

“Lift me up!” it cried impatiently, in its thin, metallic voice. “Hurry up! Don’t just sit there!”

Bobby’s eyes grew large. He stared, blinking. The stuffed animals said nothing.

“Come on!” the little soldier shouted.

Bobby reached down. The soldier seized his hand tightly. Bobby cried out.

“Be still,” the soldier commanded. “Lift me up to the bed. I have things to discuss with you, things of great importance.”

Bobby put it down on the bed beside him. The room was silent, except for the faint whirring of the metal figure.

“This is a nice room,” the soldier said presently. “A very nice room.”

Bobby drew back a little on the bed.

“What’s the matter?” the soldier said sharply, turning its head and staring up.

“Nothing.”

“What is it?” The little figure peered at him. “You’re not afraid of me, are you?”

Bobby shifted uncomfortably.

“Afraid of *me!”* The soldier laughed. “I’m only a little metal man, only six inches high.” It laughed again and again. It ceased abruptly. “Listen. I’m going to live here with you for a while. I won’t hurt you; you can count on that. I’m a friend — a good friend.”

It peered up a little anxiously. “But I want you to do things for me. You won’t mind doing things, will you? Tell me: how many are there of them in your family?”

Bobby hesitated.

“Come, how many of *them?* Adults.”

“Three… . Daddy, and Mother, and Foxie.”

“Foxie? Who is that?”

“My grandmother.”

“Three of them.” The figure nodded. “I see. Only three. But others come from time to time? Other Adults visit this house?”

Bobby nodded.

“Three. That’s not too many. Three are not so much of a problem. According to the factory —”

It broke off. “Good. Listen to me. I don’t want you to say anything to them about me. I’m *your* friend, your secret friend. They won’t be interested in hearing about me. I’m not going to hurt you, remember. You have nothing to fear. I’m going to live right here, with you.”

It watched the boy intently, lingering over the last words.

“I’m going to be a sort of private teacher. I’m going to teach you things, things to do, things to say. Just like a tutor should. Will you like that?”

Silence.

“Of course you’ll like it. We could even begin now. Perhaps you want to know the proper way to address me. Do you want to learn that?”

“Address you?” Bobby stared down.

“You are to call me… .” The figure paused, hesitating. It drew itself together, proudly. “You are to call me — My Lord.”

Bobby leaped up, his hands to his face.

“My Lord,” the figure said relentlessly. “My Lord. You don’t really need to start now. I’m tired.” The figure sagged. “I’m almost run down. Please wind me up again in about an hour.”

The figure began to stiffen. It gazed up at the boy. “In an hour. Will you wind me tight? You will, won’t you?”

Its voice trailed off into silence.

Bobby nodded slowly. “All right,” he murmured. “All right.”

It was Tuesday. The window was open, and warm sunlight came drifting into the room. Bobby was away at school; the house was silent and empty. The stuffed animals were back in the closet.

My Lord lay on the dresser, propped up, looking out the window, resting contentedly.

There came a faint humming sound. Something small flew suddenly into the room. The small object circled a few times and then came slowly to rest on the white cloth of the dresser-top, beside the metal soldier. It was a tiny toy airplane.

“How is it going?” the airplane said. “Is everything all right so far?”

“Yes,” My Lord said. “And the others?”

“Not so good. Only a handful of them managed to reach Children.”

The soldier gasped in pain.

“The largest group fell into the hands of Adults. As you know, that is not satisfactory. It is very difficult to control Adults. They break away, or they wait until the spring is unwound —”

“I know.” My Lord nodded glumly.

“The news will most certainly continue to be bad. We must be prepared for it.”

“There’s more. Tell me!”

“Frankly, about half of them have already been destroyed, stepped on by Adults. A dog is said to have broken up one. There’s no doubt of it: our only hope is through Children. We must succeed there, if at all.”

The little soldier nodded. The messenger was right, of course. They had never considered that a direct attack against the ruling race, the Adults, would win. Their size, their power, their enormous stride would protect them. The toy vender was a good example. He had tried to break away many times, tried to fool them and get loose. Part of the group had to be wound at all times to watch him, and there was that frightening day when he failed to wind them tight, hoping that —

“You’re giving the Child instructions?” the airplane asked. “You’re preparing him?”

“Yes. He understands that I’m going to be here. Children seem to be like that. As a subject race they have been taught to accept; it’s all they can do. I am another teacher, invading his life, giving him orders. Another voice, telling him that —”

“You’ve started the second phase?”

“So soon?” My Lord was amazed. “Why? Is it necessary, so quickly?”

“The factory is becoming anxious. Most of the group has been destroyed, as I said.”

“I know.” My Lord nodded absently. “We expected it, we planned with realism, knowing the chances.” It strode back and forth on the dresser-top. “Naturally, many would fall into their hands, the Adults. The Adults are everywhere, in all key positions, important stations. It’s the psychology of the ruling race to control each phase of social life. But as long as those who reach Children survive —”

“You were not supposed to know, but outside of yourself, there’s only three left. Just three.”

“Three?” My Lord stared.

“Even those who reached Children have been destroyed right and left. The situation is tragic. That’s why they want you to get started with the second phase.”

My Lord clenched its fists, its features locked in iron horror. Only three left… What hopes they had entertained for this band, venturing out, so little, so dependent on the weather — and on being wound up tight. If only they were larger! The Adults were so huge.

But the Children. What had gone wrong? What had happened to their one chance, their one fragile hope?

“How did it happen? What occurred?”

“No one knows. The factory is in a turmoil. And now they’re running short of materials. Some of the machines have broken down and nobody knows how to run them.” The airplane coasted toward the edge of the dresser. “I must be getting back. I’ll report later to see how you’re getting on.”

The airplane flew up into the air and out through the open window. My Lord watched it, dazed.

What could have happened? They had been so certain about the Children. It was all planned — It meditated.

Evening. The boy sat at the table, staring absently at his geography book. He shifted unhappily, turning the pages. At last he closed the book. He slid from his chair and went to the closet. He was reaching into the closet for the bulging carton when a voice came drifting to him from the dresser-top.

“Later. You can play with them later. I must discuss something with you.”

The boy turned back to the table, his face listless and tired. He nodded, sinking down against the table, his head on his arms.

“You’re not asleep, are you?” My Lord said.

“No.”

“Then listen. Tomorrow when you leave school I want you to go to a certain address. It’s not far from the school. It’s a toy store. Perhaps you know it. Don’s Toyland.”

“I haven’t any money.”

“It doesn’t matter. This has all been arranged for long in advance. Go to Toyland and say to the man: ‘I was told to come for the package.’ Can you remember that? ‘I was told to come for the package.’ “

“What’s in the package?”

“Some tools, and some toys for you. To go along with me.” The metal figure rubbed its hands together. “Nice modern toys, two toy tanks and a machine gun. And some spare parts for —”

There were footsteps on the stairs outside.

“Don’t forget,” My Lord said nervously. “You’ll do it? This phase of the plan is extremely important.”

It wrung its hands together in anxiety.

The boy brushed the last strands of hair into place. He put his cap on and picked up his school books. Outside, the morning was gray and dismal. Rain fell, slowly, soundlessly.

Suddenly the boy set his books down again. He went to the closet and reached inside. His fingers closed over Teddo’s leg, and he drew him out.

The boy sat on the bed, holding Teddo against his cheek. For a long time he sat with the stuffed bear, oblivious to everything else.

Abruptly he looked toward the dresser. My Lord was lying outstretched, silent. Bobby went hurriedly back to the closet and laid Teddo into the carton. He crossed the room to the door. As he opened the door the little metal figure on the dresser stirred.

“Remember Don’s Toyland… .”

The door closed. My Lord heard the Child going heavily down the stairs, clumping unhappily. My Lord exulted. It was working out all right. Bobby wouldn’t want to do it, but he would. And once the tools and parts and weapons were safely inside there wouldn’t be any chance of failure.

Perhaps they would capture a second factory. Or better yet: build dies and machines themselves to turn out larger Lords. Yes, if only they could be larger, just a little larger. They were so small, so very tiny, only a few inches high. Would the Movement fail, pass away, because they were too tiny, too fragile?

But with tanks and guns! Yet, of all the packages so carefully secreted in the toyshop, this would be the only one, the only one to be —

Something moved.

My Lord turned quickly. From the closet Teddo came, lumbering slowly.

"Bonzo," he said. "Bonzo, go over by the window. I think it came in that way, if I'm not mistaken."

The stuffed rabbit reached the window-sill in one skip. He huddled, gazing outside. "Nothing yet."

"Good." Teddo moved toward the dresser. He looked up. "Little Lord, please come down. You've been up there much too long."

My Lord stared. Fred, the rubber pig, was coming out of the closet. Puffing, he reached the dresser. "I'll go up and get it," he said. "I don't think it will come down by itself. We'll have to help it."

"What are you doing?" My Lord cried. The rubber pig was settling himself on his haunches, his ears down flat against his head. "What's happening?"

Fred leaped. And at the same time Teddo began to climb swiftly, catching onto the handles of the dresser. Expertly, he gained the top. My Lord was edging toward the wall, glancing down at the floor, far below.

“So this is what happened to the others,” it murmured. “I understand. An Organization, waiting for us. Then everything is known.”

It leaped.

When they had gathered up the pieces and had got them under the carpet, Teddo said:

“That part was easy. Let’s hope the rest won’t be any harder.”

“What do you mean?” Fred said.

“The package of toys. The tanks and guns.”

“Oh, we can handle them. Remember how we helped next door when that first little Lord, the first one we ever encountered —”

Teddo laughed. “It did put up quite a fight. It was tougher than this one. But we had the panda bears from across the way.”

“We’ll do it again,” Fred said. “I’m getting so I rather enjoy it.”

“Me, too,” Bonzo said from the window.

Beyond Lies the Wub

They had almost finished with the loading. Outside stood the Optus, his arms folded, his face sunk in gloom. Captain Franco walked leisurely down the gangplank, grinning.

"What's the matter?" he said. "You're getting paid for all this."

The Optus said nothing. He turned away, collecting his robes. The Captain put his boot on the hem of the robe.

"Just a minute. Don't go off. I'm not finished."

"Oh?" The Optus turned with dignity. "I am going back to the village." He looked toward the animals and birds being driven up the gangplank into the spaceship. "I must organize new hunts."

Franco lit a cigarette. "Why not? You people can go out into the veldt and track it all down again. But when we run halfway between Mars and Earth —"

The Optus went off, wordless. Franco joined the first mate at the bottom of the gangplank.

"How's it coming?" he asked. He looked at his watch. "We got a good bargain here."

The mate glanced at him sourly. "How do you explain that?"

"What's the matter with you? We need it more than they do."

"I'll see you later, Captain." The mate threaded his way up the plank, between the long-legged Martian go-birds, into the ship. Franco watched

him disappear. He was just starting up after him, up the plank toward the port, when he saw *it.*

“My God!” He stood staring, his hands on his hips. Peterson was walking along the path, his face red, leading *it* by a string.

“I’m sorry, Captain” he said, tugging at the string. Franco walked toward him.

“What is it?”

The wub stood sagging, its great body settling slowly. It was sitting down, its eyes half shut. A few flies buzzed about its flank, and it switched its tail. It sat. There was silence.

“It’s a wub,” Peterson said. “I got it from a native for fifty cents. He said it was a very unusual animal. Very respected.”

“This?” Franco poked the great sloping side of the wub. “It’s a pig! A huge dirty pig!”

“Yes sir, it’s a pig. The natives call it a wub.”

“A huge pig. It must weigh four hundred pounds.” Franco grabbed a tuft of the rough hair. The wub gasped. Its eyes opened, small and moist. Then its great mouth twitched.

A tear rolled down the wub’s cheek and splashed on the floor.

“Maybe it’s good to eat,” Peterson said nervously.

“We’ll soon find out,” Franco said.

The wub survived the takeoff, sound asleep in the hold of the ship. When they were out in space and everything was running smoothly, Captain Franco bade his men fetch the wub upstairs so that he might perceive what manner of beast it was.

The wub grunted and wheezed, squeezing up the passageway.

“Come on,” Jones grated, pulling at the rope. The wub twisted, rubbing its skin off on the smooth chrome walls. It burst into the anteroom, tumbling down in a heap. The men leaped up.

“Good Lord,” French said. “What is it?”

“Peterson says it’s a wub,” Jones said. “It belongs to him.” He kicked at the wub. The wub stood up unsteadily, panting.

“What’s the matter with it?” French came over. “Is it going to be sick?”

They watched. The wub rolled its eyes mournfully. It gazed around at the men.

“I think it’s thirsty,” Peterson said. He went to get some water. French shook his head.

“No wonder we had so much trouble taking off. I had to reset all my ballast calculations.”

Peterson came back with the water. The wub began to lap gratefully, splashing the men.

Captain Franco appeared at the door.

“Let’s have a look at it.” He advanced, squinting critically. “You got this for fifty cents?”

“Yes, sir,” Peterson said. “It eats almost anything. I fed it on grain and it liked that. And then potatoes, and mash, and scraps from the table, and milk. It seems to enjoy eating. After it eats it lies down and goes to sleep.”

“I see,” Captain Franco said. “Now, as to its taste. That’s the real question. I doubt if there’s much point in fattening it up any more. It seems fat enough to me already. Where’s the cook? I want him here. I want to find out —”

The wub stopped lapping and looked up at the Captain. “Really, Captain,” the wub said. “I suggest we talk of other matters.”

The room was silent.

“What was that?” Franco said. “Just now.”

“The wub, sir,” Peterson said. “It spoke.” They all looked at the wub.

“What did it say? What did it say?”

“It suggested we talk about other things.”

Franco walked toward the wub. He went all around it, examining it from every side. Then he came back over and stood with the men.

“I wonder if there’s a native inside it,” he said thoughtfully. “Maybe we should open it up and have a look.”

“Oh, goodness!” the wub cried. “Is that all you people can think of, killing and cutting?”

Franco clenched his fists. “Come out of there! Whoever you are, come out!”

Nothing stirred. The men stood together, their faces blank, staring at the wub. The wub swished its tail. It belched suddenly. “I beg your pardon,” the wub said.

“I don’t think there’s anyone in there,” Jones said in a low voice. They all looked at each other. The cook came in.

“You wanted me, Captain?” he said. “What’s this thing?”

“This is a wub,” Franco said. “It’s to be eaten. Will you measure it and figure out —”

“I think we should have a talk,” the wub said. “I’d like to discuss this with you, Captain, if I might. I can see that you and I do not agree on some basic issues.”

The Captain took a long time to answer. The wub waited good-naturedly, licking the water from its jowls.

“Come into my office,” the Captain said at last. He turned and walked out of the room. The wub rose and padded after him. The men watched it go out. They heard it climbing the stairs.

“I wonder what the outcome will be,” the cook said. “Well, I’ll be in the kitchen. Let me know as soon as you hear.”

“Sure,” Jones said. “Sure.”

The wub eased itself down in the corner with a sigh. “You must forgive me,” it said. “I’m afraid I’m addicted to various forms of relaxation. When one is as large as I —”

The Captain nodded impatiently. He sat down at his desk and folded his hands.

“All right,” he said. “Let’s get started. You’re a wub? Is that correct?”

The wub shrugged. “I suppose so. That’s what they call us, the natives, I mean. We have our own term.”

“And you speak English? You’ve been in contact with Earthmen before?”

“No.”

“Then how do you do it?”

“Speak English? Am I speaking English? I’m not conscious of speaking anything in particular. I examined your mind —”

“My mind?”

“I studied the contents, especially the semantic warehouse, as I refer to it —”

“I see,” the Captain said. “Telepathy. Of course.”

“We are a very old race,” the wub said. “Very old and very ponderous. It is difficult for us to move around. You can appreciate anything so slow and heavy would be at the mercy of more agile forms of life. There was no use in our relying on physical defenses. How could we win? Too heavy to run, too soft to fight, too good-natured to hunt for game —”

“How do you live?”

“Plants. Vegetables. We can eat almost anything. We’re very catholic. Tolerant, eclectic, catholic. We live and let live. That’s how we’ve gotten along.”

The wub eyed the Captain.

“And that’s why I so violently objected to this business about having me boiled. I could see the image in your mind — most of me in the frozen food locker, some of me in the kettle, a bit for your pet cat —”

“So you read minds?” the Captain said. “How interesting. Anything else? I mean, what else can you do along those lines?”

“A few odds and ends,” the wub said absently, staring around the room. “A nice apartment you have here, Captain. You keep it quite neat. I respect lifeforms that are tidy. Some Martian birds are quite tidy. They throw things out of their nests and sweep them —”

“Indeed.” The Captain nodded. “But to get back to the problem…”

“Quite so. You spoke of dining on me. The taste, I am told, is good. A little fatty, but tender. But how can any lasting contact be established between your people and mine if you resort to such barbaric attitudes? Eat me? Rather you should discuss questions with me, philosophy, the arts —”

The Captain stood up. “Philosophy. It might interest you to know that we will be hard put to find something to eat for the next month. An unfortunate spoilage —”

“I know.” The wub nodded. “But wouldn’t it be more in accord with your principles of democracy if we all drew straws, or something along that line? After all, democracy is to protect the minority from just such infringements. Now, if each of us casts one vote —”

The Captain walked to the door.

“Nuts to you,” he said. He opened the door. He opened his mouth.

He stood frozen, his mouth wide, his eyes staring, his fingers still on the knob.

The wub watched him. Presently it padded out of the room, edging past the Captain. It went down the hall, deep in meditation.

The room was quiet.

“So you see,” the wub said, “we have a common myth. Your mind contains many familiar myth symbols. Ishtar, Odysseus —”

Peterson sat silently, staring at the floor. He shifted in his chair.

“Go on,” he said. “Please go on.”

“I find in your Odysseus a figure common to the mythology of most self-conscious races. As I interpret it, Odysseus wanders as an individual aware of himself as such. This is the idea of separation, of separation from family and country. The process of individuation.”

“But Odysseus returns to his home.” Peterson looked out the port window, at the stars, endless stars, burning intently in the empty universe. “Finally he goes home.”

“As must all creatures. The moment of separation is a temporary period, a brief journey of the soul. It begins, it ends. The wanderer returns to land and race… .”

The door opened. The wub stopped, turning its great head. Captain Franco came into the room, the men behind him. They hesitated at the door.

“Are you all right?” French said.

“Do you mean me?” Peterson said, surprised. “Why me?”

Franco lowered his gun. “Come over here,” he said to Peterson. “Get up and come here.”

There was silence.

“Go ahead,” the wub said. “It doesn’t matter.”

Peterson stood up. “What for?”

“It’s an order.”

Peterson walked to the door. French caught his arm.

“What’s going on?” Peterson wrenched loose. “What’s the matter with you?”

Captain Franco moved toward the wub. The wub looked up from where it lay in the corner, pressed against the wall.

“It is interesting,” the wub said, “that you are obsessed with the idea of eating me. I wonder why.”

“Get up,” Franco said.

“If you wish.” The wub rose, grunting. “Be patient. It is difficult for me.” It stood, gasping, its tongue lolling foolishly.

“Shoot it now,” French said.

“For God’s sake!” Peterson exclaimed. Jones turned to him quickly, his eyes gray with fear.

“You didn’t see him — like a statue, standing there, his mouth open. If we hadn’t come down, he’d still be there.”

“Who? The Captain?” Peterson stared around. “But he’s all right now.”

They looked at the wub, standing in the middle of the room, its great chest rising and falling.

“Come on,” Franco said. “Out of the way.”

The men pulled aside toward the door.

“You are quite afraid, aren’t you?” the wub said. “Have I done anything to you? I am against the idea of hurting. All I have done is try to protect myself. Can you expect me to rush eagerly to my death? I am a sensible being like yourselves. I was curious to see your ship, learn about you. I suggested to the native —”

The gun jerked.

“See,” Franco said. “I thought so.”

The wub settled down, panting. It put its paws out, pulling its tail around it.

“It is very warm,” the wub said. “I understand that we are close to the jets. Atomic power. You have done many wonderful things with it — technically. Apparently your scientific hierarchy is not equipped to solve moral, ethical —”

Franco turned to the men, crowding behind him, wide-eyed, silent.

“I’ll do it. You can watch.”

French nodded. “Try to hit the brain. It’s no good for eating. Don’t hit the chest. If the rib cage shatters, we’ll have to pick bones out.”

“Listen,” Peterson said, licking his lips. “Has it done anything? What harm has it done? I’m asking you. And anyhow, it’s still mine. You have no right to shoot it. It doesn’t belong to you.”

Franco raised his gun.

“I’m going out,” Jones said, his face white and sick. “I don’t want to see it.”

“Me, too,” French said. The men straggled out, murmuring. Peterson lingered at the door.

“It was talking to me about myths,” he said. “It wouldn’t hurt anyone.”

He went outside.

Franco walked toward the wub. The wub looked up slowly. It swallowed.

“A very foolish thing,” it said. “I am sorry that you want to do it. There was a parable that your Saviour related —”

It stopped, staring at the gun.

“Can you look me in the eye and do it?” the wub said. “Can you do that?”

The Captain gazed down. “I can look you in the eye,” he said. “Back on the farm we had hogs, dirty razorback hogs. I can do it.”

Staring down at the wub, into the gleaming, moist eyes, he pressed the trigger.

The taste was excellent.

They sat glumly around the table, some of them hardly eating at all. The only one who seemed to be enjoying himself was Captain Franco.

“More?” he said, looking around. “More? And some wine, perhaps.”

“Not me,” French said. “I think I’ll go back to the chart room.”

“Me, too.” Jones stood up, pushing his chair back. “I’ll see you later.”

The Captain watched them go. Some of the others excused themselves.

“What do you suppose the matter is?” the Captain said. He turned to Peterson. Peterson sat staring down at his plate, at the potatoes, the green peas, and at the thick slab of tender, warm meat.

He opened his mouth. No sound came.

The Captain put his hand on Peterson’s shoulder.

“It is only organic matter, now,” he said. “The life essence is gone.” He ate, spooning up the gravy with some bread. “I, myself, love to eat. It is one of the greatest things that a living creature can enjoy. Eating, resting, meditation, discussing things.”

Peterson nodded. Two more men got up and went out. The Captain drank some water and sighed.

“Well,” he said. “I must say that this was a very enjoyable meal. All the reports I had heard were quite true — the taste of wub. Very fine. But I was prevented from enjoying this in times past.”

He dabbed at his lips with his napkin and leaned back in his chair. Peterson stared dejectedly at the table.

The Captain watched him intently. He leaned over.

“Come, come,” he said. “Cheer up! Let’s discuss things.”

He smiled.

“As I was saying before I was interrupted, the role of Odysseus in the myths —”

Peterson jerked up, staring.

“To go on,” the Captain said. “Odysseus, as I understand him —”

The Gun

The Captain peered into the eyepiece of the telescope. He adjusted the focus quickly.

"It was an atomic fission we saw, all right," he said presently. He sighed and pushed the eyepiece away. "Any of you who wants to look may do so. But it's not a pretty sight."

"Let me look," Tance the archeologist said. He bent down to look, squinting. "Good Lord!" He leaped violently back, knocking against Doric, the Chief Navigator.

"Why did we come all this way, then?" Doric asked, looking around at the other men. "There's no point even in landing. Let's go back at once."

"Perhaps he's right," the biologist murmured. "But I'd like to look for myself, if I may." He pushed past Tance and peered into the sight.

He saw a vast expanse, an endless surface of gray, stretching to the edge of the planet. At first he thought it was water but after a moment he realized that it was slag, pitted, fused slag, broken only by hills of rock jutting up at intervals. Nothing moved or stirred. Everything was silent, dead.

"I see," Fomar said, backing away from the eyepiece. "Well, I won't find any legumes there." He tried to smile, but his lips stayed unmoved. He stepped away and stood by himself, staring past the others.

"I wonder what the atmospheric sample will show," Tance said.

"I think I can guess," the Captain answered. "Most of the atmosphere is poisoned. But didn't we expect all this? I don't see why we're so surprised. A fission visible as far away as our system must be a terrible thing."

He strode off down the corridor, dignified and expressionless. They watched him disappear into the control room.

As the Captain closed the door the young woman turned. “What did the telescope show? Good or bad?”

“Bad. No life could possibly exist. Atmosphere poisoned, water vaporized, all the land fused.”

“Could they have gone underground?”

The Captain slid back the port window so that the surface of the planet under them was visible. The two of them stared down, silent and disturbed. Mile after mile of unbroken ruin stretched out, blackened slag, pitted and scarred, and occasional heaps of rock.

Suddenly Nasha jumped. “Look! Over there, at the edge. Do you see it?”

They stared. Something rose up, not rock, not an accidental formation. It was round, a circle of dots, white pellets on the dead skin of the planet. A city? Buildings of some kind?

“Please turn the ship,” Nasha said excitedly. She pushed her dark hair from her face. “Turn the ship and let’s see what it is!”

The ship turned, changing its course. As they came over the white dots the Captain lowered the ship, dropping it down as much as he dared. “Piers,” he said. “Piers of some sort of stone. Perhaps poured artificial stone. The remains of a city.”

“Oh, dear,” Nasha murmured. “How awful.” She watched the ruins disappear behind them. In a half-circle the white squares jutted from the slag, chipped and cracked, like broken teeth.

“There’s nothing alive,” the Captain said at last. “I think we’ll go right back; I know most of the crew want to go. Get the Government Receiving Station on the sender and tell them what we found, and that we —”

He staggered.

The first atomic shell had struck the ship, spinning it around. The Captain fell to the floor, crashing into the control table. Papers and instruments rained down on him. As he started to his feet the second shell struck. The ceiling cracked open, struts and girders twisted and bent. The ship shuddered, falling suddenly down, then righting itself as automatic controls took over.

The Captain lay on the floor by the smashed control board. In the corner Nasha struggled to free herself from the debris.

Outside the men were already sealing the gaping leaks in the side of the ship, through which the precious air was rushing, dissipating into the void beyond. “Help me!” Doric was shouting. “Fire over here, wiring ignited.” Two men came running. Tance watched helplessly, his eyeglasses broken and bent.

“So there is life here, after all,” he said, half to himself. “But how could —”

“Give us a hand,” Fomar said, hurrying past. “Give us a hand, we’ve got to land the ship!”

It was night. A few stars glinted above them, winking through the drifting silt that blew across the surface of the planet.

Doric peered out, frowning. “What a place to be stuck in.” He resumed his work, hammering the bent metal hull of the ship back into place. He was

wearing a pressure suit; there were still many small leaks, and radioactive particles from the atmosphere had already found their way into the ship.

Nasha and Fomar were sitting at the table in the control room, pale and solemn, studying the inventory lists.

“Low on carbohydrates,” Fomar said. “We can break down the stored fats if we want to, but —”

“I wonder if we could find anything outside.” Nasha went to the window. “How uninviting it looks.” She paced back and forth, very slender and small, her face dark with fatigue. “What do you suppose an exploring party would find?”

Fomar shrugged. “Not much. Maybe a few weeds growing in cracks here and there. Nothing we could use. Anything that would adapt to this environment would be toxic, lethal.”

Nasha paused, rubbing her cheek. There was a deep scratch there, still red and swollen. “Then how do you explain — *it?* According to your theory the inhabitants must have died in their skins, fried like yams. But who fired on us? Somebody detected us, made a decision, aimed a gun.”

“And gauged distance,” the Captain said feebly from the cot in the corner. He turned toward them. “That’s the part that worries me. The first shell put us out of commission, the second almost destroyed us. They were well aimed, perfectly aimed. We’re not such an easy target.”

“True.” Fomar nodded. “Well, perhaps we’ll know the answer before we leave here. What a strange situation! All our reasoning tells us that no life could exist; the whole planet burned dry, the atmosphere itself gone, completely poisoned.”

“The gun that fired the projectiles survived,” Nasha said. “Why not people?”

“It’s not the same. Metal doesn’t need air to breathe. Metal doesn’t get leukemia from radioactive particles. Metal doesn’t need food and water.”

There was silence.

“A paradox,” Nasha said. “Anyhow, in the morning I think we should send out a search party. And meanwhile we should keep on trying to get the ship in condition for the trip back.”

“It’ll be days before we can take off,” Fomar said. “We should keep every man working here. We can’t afford to send out a party.”

Nasha smiled a little. “We’ll send you in the first party. Maybe you can discover — what was it you were so interested in?”

“Legumes. Edible legumes.”

“Maybe you can find some of them. Only —”

“Only what?”

“Only watch out. They fired on us once without even knowing who we were or what we came for. Do you suppose that they fought with each other? Perhaps they couldn’t imagine anyone being friendly, under any circumstances. What a strange evolutionary trait, inter-species warfare. Fighting within the race!”

“We’ll know in the morning,” Fomar said. “Let’s get some sleep.”

The sun came up chill and austere. The three people, two men and a woman, stepped through the port, dropping down on the hard ground below.

“What a day,” Doric said grumpily. “I said how glad I’d be to walk on firm ground again, but —”

“Come on,” Nasha said. “Up beside me. I want to say something to you. Will you excuse us, Tance?”

Tance nodded gloomily. Doric caught up with Nasha. They walked together, their metal shoes crunching the ground underfoot. Nasha glanced at him.

“Listen. The Captain is dying. No one knows except the two of us. By the end of the day-period of this planet he’ll be dead. The shock did something to his heart. He was almost sixty, you know.”

Doric nodded. “That’s bad. I have a great deal of respect for him. You will be captain in his place, of course. Since you’re vice-captain now —”

“No. I prefer to see someone else lead, perhaps you or Fomar. I’ve been thinking over the situation and it seems to me that I should declare myself mated to one of you, whichever of you wants to be captain. Then I could devolve the responsibility.”

“Well, I don’t want to be captain. Let Fomar do it.”

Nasha studied him, tall and blond, striding along beside her in his pressure suit. “I’m rather partial to you,” she said. “We might try it for a time, at least. But do as you like. Look, we’re coming to something.”

They stopped walking, letting Tance catch up. In front of them was some sort of a ruined building. Doric stared around thoughtfully.

“Do you see? This whole place is a natural bowl, a huge valley. See how the rock formations rise up on all sides, protecting the floor. Maybe some of the great blast was deflected here.”

They wandered around the ruins, picking up rocks and fragments. “I think this was a farm,” Tance said, examining a piece of wood. “This was

part of a tower windmill."

"Really?" Nasha took the stick and turned it over. "Interesting. But let's go; we don't have much time."

"Look," Doric said suddenly. "Off there, a long way off. Isn't that something?" He pointed.

Nasha sucked in her breath. "The white stones."

"What?"

Nasha looked up at Doric. "The white stones, the great broken teeth. We saw them, the Captain and I, from the control room." She touched Doric's arm gently. "That's where they fired from. I didn't think we had landed so close."

"What is it?" Tance said, coming up to them. "I'm almost blind without my glasses. What do you see?"

"The city. Where they fired from."

"Oh." All three of them stood together. "Well, let's go," Tance said. "There's no telling what we'll find there." Doric frowned at him.

"Wait. We don't know what we would be getting into. They must have patrols. They probably have seen us already, for that matter."

"They probably have seen the ship itself," Tance said. "They probably know right now where they can find it, where they can blow it up. So what difference does it make whether we go closer or not?"

"That's true," Nasha said. "If they really want to get us we haven't a chance. We have no armaments at all; you know that."

“I have a hand weapon,” Doric nodded. “Well, let’s go on, then. I suppose you’re right, Tance.”

“But let’s stay together,” Tance said nervously. “Nasha, you’re going too fast.”

Nasha looked back. She laughed. “If we expect to get there by nightfall we must go fast.”

They reached the outskirts of the city at about the middle of the afternoon. The sun, cold and yellow, hung above them in the colorless sky. Doric stopped at the top of a ridge overlooking the city.

“Well, there it is. What’s left of it.”

There was not much left. The huge concrete piers which they had noticed were not piers at all, but the ruined foundations of buildings. They had been baked by the searing heat, baked and charred almost to the ground. Nothing else remained, only this irregular circle of white squares, perhaps four miles in diameter.

Doric spat in disgust. “More wasted time. A dead skeleton of a city, that’s all.”

“But it was from here that the firing came,” Tance murmured. “Don’t forget that.”

“And by someone with a good eye and a great deal of experience,” Nasha added. “Let’s go.”

They walked into the city between the ruined buildings. No one spoke. They walked in silence, listening to the echo of their footsteps.

“It’s macabre,” Doric muttered. “I’ve seen ruined cities before but they died of old age, old age and fatigue. This was killed, seared to death. This

city didn’t die — it was murdered.”

“I wonder what the city was called,” Nasha said. She turned aside, going up the remains of a stairway from one of the foundations. “Do you think we might find a signpost? Some kind of plaque?”

She peered into the ruins.

“There’s nothing there,” Doric said impatiently. “Come on.”

“Wait.” Nasha bent down, touching a concrete stone. “There’s something inscribed on this.”

“What is it?” Tance hurried up. He squatted in the dust, running his gloved fingers over the surface of the stone. “Letters, all right.” He took a writing stick from the pocket of his pressure suit and copied the inscription on a bit of paper. Dorle glanced over his shoulder. The inscription was:

FRANKLIN APARTMENTS

“That’s this city,” Nasha said softly. “That was its name.”

Tance put the paper in his pocket and they went on. After a time Dorle said, “Nasha, you know, I think we’re being watched. But don’t look around.”

The woman stiffened. “Oh? Why do you say that? Did you see something?”

“No. I can feel it, though. Don’t you?”

Nasha smiled a little. “I feel nothing, but perhaps I’m more used to being stared at.” She turned her head slightly. “Oh!”

Dorle reached for his hand weapon. “What is it? What do you see?” Tance had stopped dead in his tracks, his mouth half open.

“The gun,” Nasha said. “It’s the gun.”

“Look at the size of it. The size of the thing.” Dorle unfastened his hand weapon slowly. “That’s it, all right.”

The gun was huge. Stark and immense it pointed up at the sky, a mass of steel and glass, set in a huge slab of concrete. Even as they watched the gun moved on its swivel base, whirring underneath. A slim vane turned with the wind, a network of rods atop a high pole.

“It’s alive,” Nasha whispered. “It’s listening to us, watching us.”

The gun moved again, this time clockwise. It was mounted so that it could make a full circle. The barrel lowered a trifle, then resumed its original position.

“But who fires it?” Tance said.

Dorle laughed. “No one. No one fires it.”

They stared at him. “What do you mean?”

“It fires itself.”

They couldn’t believe him. Nasha came close to him, frowning, looking up at him. “I don’t understand. What do you mean, it fires itself?”

“Watch, I’ll show you. Don’t move.” Dorle picked up a rock from the ground. He hesitated a moment and the tossed the rock high in the air. The rock passed in front of the gun. Instantly the great barrel moved, the vanes contracted.

The rock fell to the ground. The gun paused, then resumed its calm swivel, its slow circling.

"You see," Dorle said, "it noticed the rock, as soon as I threw it up in the air. It's alert to anything that flies or moves above the ground level. Probably it detected us as soon as we entered the gravitational field of the planet. It probably had a bead on us from the start. We don't have a chance. It knows all about the ship. It's just waiting for us to take off again."

"I understand about the rock," Nasha said, nodding. "The gun noticed it, but not us, since we're on the ground, not above. It's only designed to combat objects in the sky. The ship is safe until it takes off again, then the end will come."

"But what's this gun for?" Tance put in. "There's no one alive here. Everyone is dead."

"It's a machine," Dorle said. "A machine that was made to do a job. And it's doing the job. How it survived the blast I don't know. On it goes, waiting for the enemy. Probably they came by air in some sort of projectiles."

"The enemy," Nasha said. "Their own race. It is hard to believe that they really bombed themselves, fired at themselves."

"Well, it's over with. Except right here, where we're standing. This one gun, still alert, ready to kill. It'll go on until it wears out."

"And by that time we'll be dead," Nasha said bitterly.

"There must have been hundreds of guns like this," Dorle murmured. "They must have been used to the sight, guns, weapons, uniforms. Probably they accepted it as a natural thing, part of their lives, like eating and sleeping. An institution, like the church and the state. Men trained to fight, to lead armies, a regular profession. Honored, respected."

Tance was walking slowly toward the gun, peering nearsightedly up at it. “Quite complex, isn’t it? All those vanes and tubes. I suppose this is some sort of a telescopic sight.” His gloved hand touched the end of a long tube.

Instantly the gun shifted, the barrel retracting. It swung —

“Don’t move!” Dorle cried. The barrel swung past them as they stood, rigid and still. For one terrible moment it hesitated over their heads, clicking and whirring, settling into position. Then the sounds died out and the gun became silent.

Tance smiled foolishly inside his helmet. “I must have put my finger over the lens. I’ll be more careful.” He made his way up onto the circular slab, stepping gingerly behind the body of the gun. He disappeared from view.

“Where did he go?” Nasha said irritably. “He’ll get us all killed.”

“Tance, come back!” Dorle shouted. “What’s the matter with you?”

“In a minute.” There was a long silence. At last the archeologist appeared. “I think I’ve found something. Come up and I’ll show you.”

“What is it?”

“Doric, you said the gun was here to keep the enemy off. I think I know why they wanted to keep the enemy off.”

They were puzzled.

“I think I’ve found what the gun is supposed to guard. Come and give me a hand.”

“All right,” Doric said abruptly. “Let’s go.” He seized Kasha’s hand. “Come on. Let’s see what he’s found. I thought something like this might happen when I saw that the gun was —”

“Like what?” Nasha pulled her hand away. “What are you talking about? You act as if you knew what he’s found.”

“I do.” Doric smiled down at her. “Do you remember the legend that all races have, the myth of the buried treasure, and the dragon, the serpent that watches it, guards it, keeping everyone away?”

She nodded. “Well?”

Doric pointed up at the gun.

“That,” he said, “is the dragon. Come on.”

Between the three of them they managed to pull up the steel cover and lay it to one side. Doric was wet with perspiration when they finished.

“It isn’t worth it,” he grunted. He stared into the dark yawning hold. “Or is it?”

Nasha clicked on her hand lamp, shining the beam down the stairs. The steps were thick with dusk and rubble. At the bottom was a steel door.

“Come on,” Tance said excitedly. He started down the stairs. They watched him reach the door and pull hopefully on it without success. “Give a hand!”

“All right.” They came gingerly after him. Doric examined the door. It was bolted shut, locked. There was an inscription on the door but he could not read it.

“Now what?” Nasha said.

Doric took out his hand weapon. “Stand back. I can’t think of any other way.” He pressed the switch. The bottom of the door glowed red. Presently it began to crumble. Doric clicked the weapon off. “I think we can get through. Let’s try.”

The door came apart easily. In a few minutes they had carried it away in pieces and stacked the pieces on the first step. Then they went on, flashing the light ahead of them.

They were in a vault. Dust lay everywhere, on everything, inches thick. Wood crates lined the walls, huge boxes and crates, packages and containers. Tance looked around curiously, his eyes bright.

“What exactly are all these?” he murmured. “Something valuable, I would think.” He picked up a round drum and opened it. A spool fell to the floor, unwinding a black ribbon. He examined it, holding it up to the light.

“Look at this!”

They came around him. “Pictures,” Nasha said. “Tiny pictures.”

“Records of some kind.” Tance closed the spool up in the drum again. “Look, hundreds of drums.” He flashed the light around. “And those crates. Let’s open one.”

Doric was already prying at the wood. The wood had turned brittle and dry. He managed to pull a section away.

It was a picture. A boy in a blue garment, smiling pleasantly, staring ahead, young and handsome. He seemed almost alive, ready to move toward them in the light of the hand lamp. It was one of them, one of the ruined race, the race that had perished.

For a long time they stared at the picture. At last Doric replaced the board.

“All these other crates,” Nasha said. “More pictures. And these drums. What are in the boxes?”

“This is their treasure,” Tance said, almost to himself. “Here are their pictures, their records. Probably all their literature is here, their stories, their myths, their ideas about the universe.”

“And their history,” Nasha said. “We’ll be able to trace their development and find out what it was that made them become what they were.”

Doric was wandering around the vault. “Odd,” he murmured. “Even at the end, even after they had begun to fight they still knew, someplace down inside them, that their real treasure was this, their books and pictures, their myths. Even after their big cities and buildings and industries were destroyed they probably hoped to come back and find this. After everything else was gone.”

“When we get back home we can agitate for a mission to come here,” Tance said. “All this can be loaded up and taken back. We’ll be leaving about —”

He stopped.

“Yes,” Doric said dryly. “We’ll be leaving about three day-periods from now. We’ll fix the ship, then take off. Soon we’ll be home, that is, if nothing happens. Like being shot down by that —”

“Oh, stop it,” Nasha said impatiently. “Leave him alone. He’s right: all this must be taken back home, sooner or later. We’ll have to solve the problem of the gun. We have no choice.”

Doric nodded. “What’s your solution, then? As soon as we leave the ground we’ll be shot down.” His face twisted bitterly. “They’ve guarded their treasure too well. Instead of being preserved it will lie here until it rots. It serves them right.”

“How?”

“Don’t you see? This was the only way they knew, building a gun and setting it up to shoot anything that came along. They were so certain that everything was hostile, the enemy, coming to take their possessions away from them. Well, they can keep them.”

Nasha was deep in thought, her mind far away. Suddenly she gasped. “Doric,” she said. “What’s the matter with us? We have no problem. The gun is no menace at all.”

The two men stared at her.

“No menace?” Doric said. “It’s already shot us down once. And as soon as we take off again —”

“Don’t you see?” Nasha began to laugh. “The poor foolish gun, it’s completely harmless. Even I could deal with it.”

“You?”

Her eyes were flashing. “With a crowbar. With a hammer or a stick of wood. Let’s go back to the ship and load up. Of course we’re at its mercy in the air: that’s the way it was made. It can fire into the sky, shoot down anything that flies. But that’s all. Against something on the ground it has no defenses. Isn’t that right?”

Doric nodded slowly. “The soft underbelly of the dragon. In the legend, the dragon’s armor doesn’t cover its stomach.” He began to laugh. “That’s

right. That’s perfectly right.”

“Let’s go, then,” Nasha said. “Let’s get back to the ship. We have work to do here.”

It was early the next morning when they reached the ship. During the night the Captain had died, and the crew had ignited his body, according to custom. They had stood solemnly around it until the last ember died. As they were going back to their work the woman and the two men appeared, dirty and tired, still excited.

And presently, from the ship, a line of people came, each carrying something in his hands. The line marched across the gray slag, the eternal expanse of fused metal. When they reached the weapon they all fell on the gun at once, with crowbars, hammers, anything that was heavy and hard.

The telescopic sights shattered into bits. The wiring was pulled out, torn to shreds. The delicate gears were smashed, dented.

Finally the warheads themselves were carried off and the firing pins removed.

The gun was smashed, the great weapon destroyed. The people went down into the vault and examined the treasure. With its metal-armored guardian dead there was no danger any longer. They studied the pictures, the films, the crates of books, the jeweled crowns, the cups, the statues.

At last, as the sun was dipping into the gray mists that drifted across the planet they came back up the stairs again. For a moment they stood around the wrecked gun looking at the unmoving outline of it.

Then they started back to the ship. There was still much work to be done. The ship had been badly hurt, much had been damaged and lost. The important thing was to repair it as quickly as possible, to get it into the air.

With all of them working together it took just five more days to make it spaceworthy.

Nasha stood in the control room, watching the planet fall away behind them. She folded her arms, sitting down on the edge of the table.

“What are you thinking?” Doric said.

“I? Nothing.”

“Are you sure?”

“I was thinking that there must have been a time when this planet was quite different, when there was life on it.”

“I suppose there was. It’s unfortunate that no ships from our system came this far, but then we had no reason to suspect intelligent life until we saw the fission glow in the sky.”

“And then it was too late.”

“Not quite too late. After all, their possessions, their music, books, their pictures, all of that will survive. We’ll take them home and study them, and they’ll change us. We won’t be the same afterwards. Their sculpturing, especially. Did you see the one of the great winged creature, without a head or arms? Broken off, I suppose. But those wings — It looked very old. It will change us a great deal.”

“When we come back we won’t find the gun waiting for us,” Nasha said. “Next time it won’t be there to shoot us down. We can land and take the treasure, as you call it.” She smiled up at Doric. “You’ll lead us back there, as a good captain should.”

“Captain?” Doric grinned. “Then you’ve decided.”

Nasha shrugged. “Fomar argues with me too much. I think, all in all, I really prefer you.”

“Then let’s go,” Doric said. “Let’s go back home.”

The ship roared up, flying over the ruins of the city. It turned in a huge arc and then shot off beyond the horizon, heading into outer space.

Down below, in the center of the ruined city, a single half-broken detector vane moved slightly, catching the roar of the ship. The base of the great gun throbbed painfully, straining to turn. After a moment, a red warning light flashed on down inside its destroyed works.

And a long way off, a hundred miles from the city, another warning light flashed on, far underground. Automatic relays flew into action. Gears turned, belts whined. On the ground above a section of metal slag slipped back. A ramp appeared.

A moment later a small cart rushed to the surface.

The cart turned toward the city. A second cart appeared behind it. It was loaded with wiring cables. Behind it a third cart came, loaded with telescopic tube sights. And behind came more carts, some with relays, some with firing controls, some with tools and parts, screws and bolts, pins and nuts. The final one contained atomic warheads.

The carts lined up behind the first one, the lead cart. The lead cart started off, across the frozen ground, bumping calmly along, followed by the others. Moving toward the city.

To the damaged gun.

The Skull

“What is this opportunity?” Conger asked. “Go on. I’m interested.”

The room was silent; all faces were fixed on Conger — still in the drab prison uniform. The Speaker leaned forward slowly.

“Before you went to prison your trading business was paying well — all illegal — all very profitable. Now you have nothing, except the prospect of another six years in a cell.”

Conger scowled.

“There is a certain situation, very important to this Council, that requires your peculiar abilities. Also, it is a situation you might find interesting. You were a hunter, were you not? You’ve done a great deal of trapping, hiding in the bushes, waiting at night for the game? I imagine hunting must be a source of satisfaction to you, the chase, the stalking —”

Conger sighed. His lips twisted. “All right,” he said. “Leave that out. Get to the point. Who do you want me to kill?”

The Speaker smiled. “All in proper sequence,” he said softly.

The car slid to a stop. It was night; there was no light anywhere along the street. Conger looked out. “Where are we? What is this place?”

The hand of the guard pressed into his arm. “Come. Through that door.”

Conger stepped down, onto the damp sidewalk. The guard came swiftly after him, and then the Speaker. Conger took a deep breath of the cold air. He studied the dim outline of the building rising up before them.

“I know this place. I’ve seen it before.” He squinted, his eyes growing accustomed to the dark. Suddenly he became alert. “This is —”

“Yes. The First Church.” The Speaker walked toward the steps. “We’re expected.”

“Expected? *Here?”*

“Yes.” The Speaker mounted the stairs.

“You know we’re not allowed in their Churches, especially with guns!” He stopped. Two armed soldiers loomed up ahead, one on each side.

“All right?” The Speaker looked up at them. They nodded. The door of the Church was open. Conger could see other soldiers inside, standing about, young soldiers with large eyes, gazing at the icons and holy images.

“I see,” he said.

“It was necessary,” the Speaker said. “As you know, we have been singularly unfortunate in the past in our relations with the First Church.”

“This won’t help.”

“But it’s worth it. You will see.”

They passed through the hall and into the main chamber where the altar piece was, and the kneeling places. The Speaker scarcely glanced at the altar as they passed by. He pushed open a small side door and beckoned Conger through.

“In here. We have to hurry. The faithful will be flocking in soon.”

Conger entered, blinking. They were in a small chamber, low-ceilinged, with dark panels of old wood. There was a smell of ashes and smoldering spices in the room. He sniffed. “What’s that? The smell.”

“Cups on the wall. I don’t know.” The Speaker crossed impatiently to the far side. “According to our information, it is hidden here by this —”

Conger looked around the room. He saw books and papers, holy signs and images. A strange low shiver went through him.

“Does my job involve anyone of the Church? If it does —”

The Speaker turned, astonished. “Can it be that you believe in the Founder? Is it possible, a hunter, a killer —”

“No. Of course not. All their business about resignation to death, nonviolence —”

“What is it, then?”

Conger shrugged. “I’ve been taught not to mix with such as these. They have strange abilities. And you can’t reason with them.”

The Speaker studied Conger thoughtfully. “You have the wrong idea. It is no one here that we have in mind. We’ve found that killing them only tends to increase their numbers.”

“Then why come here? Let’s leave.”

“No. We came for something important. Something you will need to identify your man. Without it you won’t be able to find him.” A trace of a smile crossed the Speaker’s face. “We don’t want you to kill the wrong person. It’s too important.”

“I don’t make mistakes.” Conger’s chest rose. “Listen, Speaker —”

“This is an unusual situation,” the Speaker said. “You see, the person you are after — the person that we are sending you to find — is known only by certain objects here. They are the only traces, the only means of identification. Without them —”

“What are they?”

He came toward the Speaker. The Speaker moved to one side. “Look,” he said. He drew a sliding wall away, showing a dark square hole. “In there.”

Conger squatted down, staring in. He frowned. “A skull! A skeleton!”

“The man you are after has been dead for two centuries,” the Speaker said. “This is all that remains of him. And this is all you have with which to find him.”

For a long time Conger said nothing. He stared down at the bones, dimly visible in the recess of the wall. How could a man dead centuries be killed? How could he be stalked, brought down?

Conger was a hunter, a man who had lived as he pleased, where he pleased. He had kept himself alive by trading, bringing furs and pelts in from the Provinces on his own ship, riding at high speed, slipping through the customs line around Earth.

He had hunted in the great mountains of the moon. He had stalked through empty Martian cities. He had explored —

The Speaker said, “Soldier, take these objects and have them carried to the car. Don’t lose any part of them.”

The soldier went into the cupboard, reaching gingerly, squatting on his heels.

“It is my hope,” the Speaker continued softly, to Conger, “that you will demonstrate your loyalty to us, now. There are always ways for citizens to restore themselves, to show their devotion to their society. For you I think this would be a very good chance. I seriously doubt that a better one will come. And for your efforts there will be quite a restitution, of course.”

The two men looked at each other; Conger, thin, unkempt, the Speaker immaculate in his uniform.

“I understand you,” Conger said. “I mean, I understand this part, about the chance. But how can a man who has been dead two centuries be —”

“I’ll explain later,” the Speaker said. “Right now we have to hurry.” The soldier had gone out with the bones, wrapped in a blanket held carefully in his arms. The Speaker walked to the door. “Come. They’ve already discovered that we’ve broken in here, and they’ll be coming at any moment.”

They hurried down the damp steps to the waiting car. A second later the driver lifted the car up into the air, above the house-tops.

The Speaker settled back in the seat.

“The First Church has an interesting past,” he said. “I suppose you are familiar with it, but I’d like to speak of a few points that are of relevancy to us.

“It was in the twentieth century that the Movement began — during one of the periodic wars. The Movement developed rapidly, feeding on the general sense of futility, the realization that each war was breeding greater war, with no end in sight. The Movement posed a simple answer to the problem: Without military preparations — weapons — there could be no war. And without machinery and complex scientific technocracy there could be no weapons.

“The Movement preached that you couldn’t stop war by planning for it. They preached that man was losing to his machinery and science, that it was getting away from him, pushing him into greater and greater wars. Down with society, they shouted. Down with factories and science! A few more wars and there wouldn’t be much left of the world.

“The Founder was an obscure person from a small town in the American Middle West. We don’t even know his name. All we know is that one day he appeared, preaching a doctrine of nonviolence, non-resistance; no fighting, no paying taxes for guns, no research except for medicine. Live out your life quietly, tending your garden, staying out of public affairs; mind your own business. Be obscure, unknown, poor. Give away most of your possessions, leave the city. At least that was what developed from what he told the people.”

The car dropped down and landed on a roof.

“The Founder preached this doctrine, or the germ of it; there’s no telling how much the faithful have added themselves. The local authorities picked him up at once, of course. Apparently they were convinced that he meant it; he was never released. He was put to death, and his body buried secretly. It seemed that the cult was finished.”

The Speaker smiled. “Unfortunately, some of his disciples reported seeing him after the date of his death. The rumor spread; he had conquered death, he was divine. It took hold, grew. And here we are today, with a First Church, obstructing all social progress, destroying society, sowing the seeds of anarchy —”

“But the wars,” Conger said. “About them?”

“The wars? Well, there were no more wars. It must be acknowledged that the elimination of war was the direct result of nonviolence practiced on a general scale. But we can take a more objective view of war today. What was so terrible about it? War had a profound selective value, perfectly in accord with the teachings of Darwin and Mendel and others. Without war

the mass of useless, incompetent mankind, without training or intelligence, is permitted to grow and expand unchecked. War acted to reduce their numbers; like storms and earthquakes and droughts, it was nature's way of eliminating the unfit.

"Without war the lower elements of mankind have increased all out of proportion. They threaten the educated few, those with scientific knowledge and training, the ones equipped to direct society. They have no regard for science or a scientific society, based on reason. And this Movement seeks to aid and abet them. Only when scientists are in full control can the —"

He looked at his watch and then kicked the car door open. "I'll tell you the rest as we walk."

They crossed the dark roof. "Doubtless you now know whom those bones belonged to, who it is that we are after. He has been dead just two centuries, now, this ignorant man from the Middle West, this Founder. The tragedy is that the authorities of the time acted too slowly. They allowed him to speak, to get his message across. He was allowed to preach, to start his cult. And once such a thing is under way, there's no stopping it.

"But what if he had died before he preached? What if none of his doctrines had ever been spoken? It took only a moment for him to utter them, that we know. They say he spoke just once, just one time. *Then* the authorities came, taking him away. He offered no resistance; the incident was small."

The Speaker turned to Conger.

"Small, but we're reaping the consequences of it today."

They went inside the building. Inside, the soldiers had already laid out the skeleton on a table. The soldiers stood around it, their young faces intense.

Conger went over to the table, pushing past them. He bent down, staring at the bones. “So these are his remains,” he murmured. “The Founder. The Church has hidden them for two centuries.”

“Quite so,” the Speaker said. “But now we have them. Come along down the hall.”

They went across the room to a door. The Speaker pushed it open. Technicians looked up. Conger saw machinery, whirring and turning; benches and retorts. In the center of the room was a gleaming crystal cage.

The Speaker handed a Slem-gun to Conger. “The important thing to remember is that the skull must be saved and brought back — for comparison and proof. Aim low — at the chest.”

Conger weighed the gun in his hands. “It feels good,” he said. “I know this gun — that is, I’ve seen them before, but I never used one.”

The Speaker nodded. “You will be instructed on the use of the gun and the operation of the cage. You will be given all data we have on the time and location. The exact spot was a place called Hudson’s field. About 1960 in a small community outside Denver, Colorado. And don’t forget — the only means of identification you will have will be the skull. There are visible characteristics of the front teeth, especially the left incisor —”

Conger listened absently. He was watching two men in white carefully wrapping the skull in a plastic bag. They tied it and carried it into the crystal cage. “And if I should make a mistake?”

“Pick the wrong man? Then find the right one. Don’t come back until you succeed in reaching this Founder. And you can’t wait for him to start speaking; that’s what we must avoid! You must act in advance. Take chances; shoot as soon as you think you’ve found him. He’ll be someone unusual, probably a stranger in the area. Apparently he wasn’t known.”

Conger listened dimly.

“Do you think you have it all now?” the Speaker asked.

“Yes. I think so.” Conger entered the crystal cage and sat down, placing his hands on the wheel.

“Good luck,” the Speaker said. “We’ll be awaiting the outcome. There’s some philosophical doubt as to whether one can alter the past. This should answer the question once and for all.”

Conger fingered the controls of the cage.

“By the way,” the Speaker said. “Don’t try to use this cage for purposes not anticipated in your job. We have a constant trace on it. If we want it back, we can get it back. Good luck.”

Conger said nothing. The cage was sealed. He raised his finger and touched the wheel control. He turned the wheel carefully.

He was still staring at the plastic bag when the room outside vanished.

For a long time there was nothing at all. Nothing beyond the crystal mesh of the cage. Thoughts rushed through Conger’s mind, helter-skelter. How would he know the man? How could he be certain, in advance? What had he looked like? What was his name? How had he acted, before he spoke? Would he be an ordinary person, or some strange outlandish crank?

Conger picked up the Slem-gun and held it against his cheek. The metal of the gun was cool and smooth. He practiced moving the sight. It was a beautiful gun, the kind of gun he could fall in love with. If he had owned such a gun in the Martian desert — on the long nights when he had lain, cramped and numbed with cold, waiting for things that moved through the darkness —

He put the gun down and adjusted the meter readings of the cage. The spiraling mist was beginning to condense and settle. All at once forms wavered and fluttered around him.

Colors, sounds, movements filtered through the crystal wire. He clamped the controls off and stood up.

He was on a ridge overlooking a small town. It was high noon. The air was crisp and bright. A few automobiles moved along a road. Off in the distance were some level fields. Conger went to the door and stepped outside. He sniffed the air. Then he went back into the cage.

He stood before the mirror over the shelf, examining his features. He had trimmed his beard — they had not got him to cut it off — and his hair was neat. He was dressed in the clothing of the middle-twentieth century, the odd collar and coat, the shoes of animal hide. In his pocket was money of the times. That was important. Nothing more was needed.

Nothing, except his ability, his special cunning. But he had never used it in such a way before.

He walked down the road toward the town.

The first things he noticed, were the newspapers on the stands. April 5, 1961. He was not too far off. He looked around him. There was a filling station, a garage, some taverns and a tencent store. Down the street was a grocery store and some public buildings.

A few minutes later he mounted the stairs of the little public library and passed through the doors into the warm interior.

The librarian looked up, smiling.

“Good afternoon,” she said.

He smiled, not speaking because his words would not be correct; accented and strange, probably. He went over to a table and sat down by a heap of magazines. For a moment he glanced through them. Then he was on his feet again. He crossed the room to a wide rack against the wall. His heart began to beat heavily.

Newspapers — weeks on end. He took a roll of them over to the table and began to scan them quickly. The print was odd, the letters strange. Some of the words were unfamiliar.

He set the papers aside and searched farther. At last he found what he wanted. He carried the *Cherrywood Gazette* to the table and opened it to the first page. He found what he wanted:

PRISONER HANGS SELF

An unidentified man, held by the county sheriff's office for suspicion of criminal syndicalism, was found dead this morning, by —

He finished the item. It was vague, uninforming. He needed more. He carried the *Gazette* back to the racks and then, after a moment's hesitation, approached the librarian.

"More?" he asked. "More papers. Old ones?"

She frowned. "How old? Which papers?"

"Months old. And before."

"Of the *Gazette?* This is all we have. What did you want? What are you looking for? Maybe I can help you."

He was silent.

"You might find older issues at the *Gazette* office," the woman said, taking off her glasses. "Why don't you try there? But if you'd tell me,

maybe I could help you —”

He went out.

The *Gazette* office was down a side street; the sidewalk was broken and cracked. He went inside. A heater glowed in the corner of the small office. A heavyset man stood up and came slowly over to the counter.

“What did you want, mister?” he said.

“Old papers. A month. Or more.”

“To buy? You want to buy them?”

“Yes.” He held out some of the money he had. The man stared.

“Sure,” he said. “Sure. Wait a minute.” He went quickly out of the room. When he came back he was staggering under the weight of his armload, his face red. “Here are some,” he grunted. “Took what I could find. Covers the whole year. And if you want more —”

Conger carried the papers outside. He sat down by the road and began to go through them.

What he wanted was four months back, in December. It was a tiny item, so small that he almost missed it. His hands trembled as he scanned it, using the small dictionary for some of the archaic terms.

MAN ARRESTED FOR UNLICENSED DEMONSTRATION

An unidentified man who refused to give his name was picked up in Cooper Creek by special agents of the sheriff’s office, according to Sheriff Duff. It was said the man was recently noticed in this area and had been watched continually. It was —

Cooper Creek. December, 1960. His heart pounded. That was all he needed to know. He stood up, shaking himself, stamping his feet on the cold ground. The sun had moved across the sky to the very edge of the hills. He smiled. Already he had discovered the exact time and place. Now he needed only to go back, perhaps to November, to Cooper Creek —

He walked back through the main section of town, past the library, past the grocery store. It would not be hard; the hard part was over. He would go there; rent a room, prepare to wait until the man appeared.

He turned the corner. A woman was coming out of a doorway loaded down with packages. Conger stepped aside to let her pass. The woman glanced at him. Suddenly her face turned white. She stared, her mouth open.

Conger hurried on. He looked back. What was wrong with her? The woman was still staring; she had dropped the packages to the ground. He increased his speed. He turned a second corner and went up a side street. When he looked back again the woman had come to the entrance of the street and was starting after him. A man joined her, and the two of them began to run toward him.

He lost them and left town, striding quickly, easily, up into the hills at the edge of town. When he reached the cage he stopped. What had happened? Was it something about his clothing? His dress?

He pondered. Then, as the sun set, he stepped into the cage.

Conger sat before the wheel. For a moment he waited, his hands resting lightly on the control. Then he turned the wheel, just a little, following the control readings carefully.

The grayness settled down around him.

But not for very long.

The man looked him over critically. “You better come inside,” he said. “Out of the cold.”

“Thanks.” Conger went gratefully through the open door, into the living room. It was warm and close from the heat of the little kerosene heater in the corner. A woman, large and shapeless in her flowered dress, came from the kitchen. She and the man studied him critically.

“It’s a good room,” the woman said. “I’m Mrs. Appleton. It’s got heat. You need that this time of year.”

“Yes.” He nodded, looking around.

“You want to eat with us?”

“What?”

“You want to eat with us?” The man’s brows knitted. “You’re not a foreigner, are you, mister?”

“No.” He smiled. “I was born in this country. Quite far west, though.”

“California?”

“No.” He hesitated. “Oregon.”

“What’s it like up there?” Mrs. Appleton asked. “I hear there’s a lot of trees and green. It’s so barren here. I come from Chicago, myself.”

“That’s the Middle West,” the man said to her. “You ain’t no foreigner.”

“Oregon isn’t foreign, either,” Conger said. “It’s part of the United States.”

The man nodded absently. He was staring at Conger's clothing.

"That's a funny suit you got on, mister," he said. "Where'd you get that?"

Conger was lost. He shifted uneasily. "It's a good suit," he said. "Maybe I better go some other place, if you don't want me here."

They both raised their hands protestingly. The woman smiled at him. "We just have to look out for those Reds. You know, the government is always warning us about them."

"The Reds?" He was puzzled.

"The government says they're all around. We're supposed to report anything strange or unusual, anybody doesn't act normal."

"Like me?"

They looked embarrassed. "Well, you don't look like a Red to me," the man said. "But we have to be careful. The Tribune says —"

Conger half listened. It was going to be easier than he had thought. Clearly, he would know as soon as the Founder appeared. These people, so suspicious of anything different, would be buzzing and gossiping and spreading the story. All he had to do was lie low and listen, down at the general store, perhaps. Or even here, in Mrs. Appleton's boarding house.

"Can I see the room?" he said.

"Certainly." Mrs. Appleton went to the stairs. "I'll be glad to show it to you."

They went upstairs. It was colder upstairs, but not nearly as cold as outside. Nor as cold as nights on the Martian deserts. For that he was

grateful.

He was walking slowly around the store, looking at the cans of vegetables, the frozen packages offish and meats shining and clean in the open refrigerator counters.

Ed Davies came toward him. “Can I help you?” he said. The man was a little oddly dressed, and with a beard! Ed couldn’t help smiling.

“Nothing,” the man said in a funny voice. “Just looking.”

“Sure,” Ed said. He walked back behind the counter. Mrs. Hacket was wheeling her cart up.

“Who’s he?” she whispered, her sharp face turned, her nose moving, as if it were sniffing. “I never seen him before.”

“I don’t know.”

“Looks funny to me. Why does he wear a beard? No one else wears a beard. Must be something the matter with him.”

“Maybe he likes to wear a beard. I had an uncle who —”

“Wait.” Mrs. Hacket stiffened. “Didn’t that — what was his name? The Red — that old one. Didn’t he have a beard? Marx. He had a beard.”

Ed laughed. “This ain’t Karl Marx. I saw a photograph of him once.”

Mrs. Hacket was staring at him. “You did?”

“Sure.” He flushed a little. “What’s the matter with that?”

“I’d sure like to know more about him,” Mrs. Hacket said. “I think we ought to know more, for our own good.”

“Hey, mister! Want a ride?”

Conger turned quickly, dropping his hand to his belt. He relaxed. Two young kids in a car, a girl and a boy. He smiled at them. “A ride? Sure.”

Conger got into the car and closed the door. Bill Willet pushed the gas and the car roared down the highway.

“I appreciate a ride,” Conger said carefully. “I was taking a walk between towns, but it was farther than I thought.”

“Where are you from?” Lora Hunt asked. She was pretty, small and dark, in her yellow sweater and blue skirt.

“From Cooper Creek.”

“Cooper Creek?” Bill said. He frowned. “That’s funny. I don’t remember seeing you before.”

“Why, do you come from there?”

“I was born there. I know everybody there.”

“I just moved in. From Oregon.”

“From Oregon? I didn’t know Oregon people had accents.”

“Do I have an accent?”

“You use words funny.”

“How?”

“I don’t know. Doesn’t he, Lora?”

“You slur them,” Lora said, smiling. “Talk some more. I’m interested in dialects.” She glanced at him, white-teethed. Conger felt his heart constrict.

“I have a speech impediment.”

“Oh.” Her eyes widened. “I’m sorry.”

They looked at him curiously as the car purred along. Conger for his part was struggling to find some way of asking them questions without seeming curious. “I guess people from out of town don’t come here much,” he said.

“Strangers.”

“No.” Bill shook his head. “Not very much.”

“I’ll bet I’m the first outsider for a long time.”

“I guess so.”

Conger hesitated. “A friend of mine — someone I know, might be coming through here. Where do you suppose I might —” He stopped. “Would there be anyone certain to see him? Someone I could ask, make sure I don’t miss him if he comes?”

They were puzzled. “Just keep your eyes open. Cooper Creek isn’t very big.”

“No. That’s right.”

They drove in silence. Conger studied the outline of the girl. Probably she was the boy's mistress. Perhaps she was his trial wife. Or had they developed trial marriage back so far? He could not remember. But surely such an attractive girl would be someone's mistress by this time; she would be sixteen or so, by her looks. He might ask her sometime, if they ever met again.

The next day Conger went walking along the one main street of Cooper Creek. He passed the general store, the two filling stations, and then the post office. At the corner was the soda fountain.

He stopped. Lora was sitting inside, talking to the clerk. She was laughing, rocking back and forth.

Conger pushed the door open. Warm air rushed around him. Lora was drinking hot chocolate, with whipped cream. She looked up in surprise as he slid into the seat beside her.

"I beg your pardon," he said. "Am I intruding?"

"No." She shook her head. Her eyes were large and dark. "Not at all."

The clerk came over. "What do you want?"

Conger looked at the chocolate. "Same as she has."

Lora was watching Conger, her arms folded, elbows on the counter. She smiled at him. "By the way. You don't know my name. Lora Hunt."

She was holding out her hand. He took it awkwardly, not knowing what to do with it. "Conger is my name," he murmured.

"Conger? Is that your last or first name?"

“Last or first?” He hesitated. “Last. Omar Conger.”

“Omar?” She laughed. “That’s like the poet, Omar Khayyam.”

“I don’t know of him. I know very little of poets. We restored very few works of art. Usually only the Church has been interested enough —” He broke off. She was staring. He flushed. “Where I come from,” he finished.

“The Church? Which church do you mean?”

“The Church.” He was confused. The chocolate came and he began to sip it gratefully. Lora was still watching him.

“You’re an unusual person,” she said. “Bill didn’t like you, but he never likes anything different. He’s so — so prosaic. Don’t you think that when a person gets older he should become — broadened in his outlook?”

Conger nodded.

“He says foreign people ought to stay where they belong, not come here. But you’re not so foreign. He means orientals; you know.”

Conger nodded.

The screen door opened behind them. Bill came into the room. He stared at them. “Well,” he said.

Conger turned. “Hello.”

“Well.” Bill sat down. “Hello, Lora.” He was looking at Conger. “I didn’t expect to see you here.”

Conger tensed. He could feel the hostility of the boy. “Something wrong with that?”

“No. Nothing wrong with it.”

There was silence. Suddenly Bill turned to Lora. “Come on. Let’s go.”

“Go?” She was astonished. “Why?”

“Just go!” He grabbed her hand. “Come on! The car’s outside.”

“Why, Bill Willet,” Lora said. “You’re jealous!”

“Who is this guy?” Bill said. “Do you know anything about him? Look at him, his beard —”

She flared. “So what? Just because he doesn’t drive a Packard and go to Cooper High!”

Conger sized the boy up. He was big — big and strong. Probably he was part of some civil control organization.

“Sorry,” Conger said. “I’ll go.”

“What’s your business in town?” Bill asked. “What are you doing here? Why are you hanging around Lora?”

Conger looked at the girl. He shrugged. “No reason. I’ll see you later.”

He turned away. And froze. Bill had moved. Conger’s fingers went to his belt. *Half pressure*, he whispered to himself. *No more. Half pressure.*

He squeezed. The room leaped around him. He himself was protected by the lining of his clothing, the plastic sheathing inside.

“My God —” Lora put her hands up. Conger cursed. He hadn’t meant any of it for her. But it would wear off. There was only a half-amp to it. It would tingle.

Tingle, and paralyze.

He walked out the door without looking back. He was almost to the corner when Bill came slowly out, holding onto the wall like a drunken man. Conger went on.

As Conger walked, restless, in the night, a form loomed in front of him. He stopped, holding his breath.

“Who is it?” a man’s voice came. Conger waited, tense.

“Who is it?” the man said again. He clicked something in his hand. A light flashed. Conger moved.

“It’s me,” he said.

“Who is ‘me’?”

“Conger is my name. I’m staying at the Appleton’s place. Who are you?”

The man came slowly up to him. He was wearing a leather jacket. There was a gun at his waist.

“I’m Sheriff Duff. I think you’re the person I want to talk to. You were in Bloom’s today, about three o’clock?”

“Bloom’s?”

“The fountain. Where the kids hang out.” Duff came up beside him, shining his light into Conger’s face. Conger blinked.

“Turn that thing away,” he said.

A pause. “All right.” The light flickered to the ground. “You were there. Some trouble broke out between you and the Willet boy. Is that right? You had a beef over his girl —”

“We had a discussion,” Conger said carefully.

“Then what happened?”

“Why?”

“I’m just curious. They say you did something.”

“Did something? Did what?”

“I don’t know. That’s what I’m wondering. They saw a flash, and something seemed to happen. They all blacked out. Couldn’t move.”

“How are they now?”

“All right.”

There was silence.

“Well?” Duff said. “What was it? A bomb?”

“A bomb?” Conger laughed. “No. My cigarette lighter caught fire. There was a leak, and the fluid ignited.”

“Why did they all pass out?”

“Fumes.”

Silence. Conger shifted, waiting. His fingers moved slowly toward his belt. The Sheriff glanced down. He grunted.

“If you say so,” he said. “Anyhow, there wasn’t any real harm done.” He stepped back from Conger. “And that Willet is a trouble-maker.”

“Good night, then,” Conger said. He started past the Sheriff.

“One more thing, Mr. Conger. Before you go. You don’t mind if I look at your identification, do you?”

“No. Not at all.” Conger reached into his pocket. He held his wallet out.

The Sheriff took it and shined his flashlight on it. Conger watched, breathing shallowly. They had worked hard on the wallet, studying historic documents, relics of the times, all the papers they felt would be relevant.

Duff handed it back. “Okay. Sorry to bother you.” The light winked off.

When Conger reached the house he found the Appletons sitting around the television set. They did not look up as he came in. He lingered at the door.

“Can I ask you something?” he said. Mrs. Appleton turned slowly. “Can I ask you — what’s the date?”

“The date?” She studied him. “The first of December.”

“December first! Why, it was just November!”

They were all looking at him. Suddenly he remembered. In the twentieth century they still used the old twelve month system. November fed directly

into December; there was no Quartember between them.

He gasped. Then it was tomorrow! The second of December! Tomorrow!

“Thanks,” he said. “Thanks.”

He went up the stairs. What a fool he was, forgetting. The Founder had been taken into captivity on the second of December, according to the newspaper records. Tomorrow, only twelve hours hence, the Founder would appear to speak to the people and then be dragged away.

The day was warm and bright. Conger’s shoes crunched the melting crust of snow. On he went, through the trees heavy with white. He climbed a hill and strode down the other side, sliding as he went.

He stopped to look around. Everything was silent. There was no one in sight. He brought out a thin rod from his waist and turned the handle of it. For a moment nothing happened. Then there was a shimmering in the air.

The crystal cage appeared and settled slowly down. Conger sighed. It was good to see it again. After all, it was his only way back.

He walked up on the ridge. He looked around with some satisfaction, his hands on his hips. Hudson’s field was spread out, all the way to the beginning of town. It was bare and flat, covered with a thin layer of snow.

Here, the Founder would come. Here, he would speak to them. And here the authorities would take him.

Only he would be dead before they came. He would be dead before he even spoke.

Conger returned to the crystal globe. He pushed through the door and stepped inside. He took the Slem-gun from the shelf and screwed the bolt

into place. It was ready to go, ready to fire. For a moment he considered. Should he have it with him?

No. It might be hours before the Founder came, and suppose someone approached him in the meantime? When he saw the Founder coming toward the field, then he could go and get the gun.

Conger looked toward the shelf. There was the neat package. He took it down and unwrapped it.

He held the skull in his hands, turning it over. In spite of himself, a cold feeling rushed through him. This was the man's skull, the skull of the Founder, who was still alive, who would come here, this day, who would stand on the field not fifty yards away.

What if *he* could see this, his own skull, yellow and corroded? Two centuries old. Would he still speak? Would he speak, if he could see it, the grinning, aged skull? What would there be for him to say, to tell the people? What message could he bring?

What action would not be futile, when a man could look upon his own aged, yellowed skull? Better they should enjoy their temporary lives, while they still had them to enjoy.

A man who could hold his own skull in his hands would believe in few causes, few movements. Rather, he would preach the opposite —

A sound. Conger dropped the skull back on the shelf and took up the gun. Outside something was moving. He went quickly to the door, his heart beating. Was it *he?* Was it the Founder, wandering by himself in the cold, looking for a place to speak? Was he meditating over his words, choosing his sentences?

What if he could see what Conger had held!

He pushed the door open, the gun raised. Lora!

He stared at her. She was dressed in a wool jacket and boots, her hands in her pockets. A cloud of steam came from her mouth and nostrils. Her breast was rising and falling.

Silently, they looked at each other. At last Conger lowered the gun. “What is it?” he said. “What are you doing here?” She pointed. She did not seem able to speak. He frowned; what was wrong with her?

“What is it?” he said. “What do you want?” He looked in the direction she had pointed. “I don’t see anything.”

“They’re coming.”

“They? Who? Who are coming?”

“They are. The police. During the night the Sheriff had the state police send cars. All around, everywhere. Blocking the roads. There’s about sixty of them coming. Some from town, some around behind.” She stopped, gasping. “They said — they said —”

“What?”

“They said you were some kind of Communist. They said —”

Conger went into the cage. He put the gun down on the shelf and came back out. He leaped down and went to the girl.

“Thanks. You came here to tell me? You don’t believe it?”

“I don’t know.”

“Did you come alone?”

“No. Joe brought me in his truck. From town.”

“Joe? Who’s he?”

“Joe French. The plumber. He’s a friend of Dad’s.”

“Let’s go.” They crossed the snow, up the ridge and onto the field. The little panel truck was parked halfway across the field. A heavy short man was sitting behind the wheel, smoking his pipe. He sat up as he saw the two of them coming toward him.

“Are you the one?” he said to Conger.

“Yes. Thanks for warning me.”

The plumber shrugged. “I don’t know anything about this. Lora says you’re all right.” He turned around. “It might interest you to know some more of them are coming. Not to warn you — Just curious.”

“More of them?” Conger looked toward the town. Black shapes were picking their way across the snow.

“People from the town. You can’t keep this sort of thing quiet, not in a small town. We all listen to the police radio; they heard the same way Lora did. Someone tuned in, spread it around —”

The shapes were getting closer. Conger could make out a couple of them. Bill Willet was there, with some boys from the high school. The Appletons were along, hanging back in the rear.

“Even Ed Davies,” Conger murmured.

The storekeeper was toiling onto the field, with three or four other men from the town.

“All curious as hell,” French said. “Well, I guess I’m going back to town. I don’t want my truck shot full of holes. Come on, Lora.”

She was looking up at Conger, wide-eyed.

“Come on,” French said again. “Let’s go. You sure as hell can’t stay here, you know.”

“Why?”

“There may be shooting. That’s what they all came to see. You know that don’t you, Conger?”

“Yes.”

“You have a gun? Or don’t you care?” French smiled a little. “They’ve picked up a lot of people in their time, you know. You won’t be lonely.”

He cared, all right! He had to stay here, on the field. He couldn’t afford to let them take him away. Any minute the Founder would appear, would step onto the field. Would he be one of the townsmen, standing silently at the foot of the field, waiting, watching?

Or maybe he was Joe French. Or maybe one of the cops. Anyone of them might find himself moved to speak. And the few words spoken this day were going to be important for a long time.

And Conger had to be there, ready when the first word was uttered!

“I care,” he said. “You go on back to town. Take the girl with you.”

Lora got stiffly in beside Joe French. The plumber started up the motor. “Look at them, standing there,” he said. “Like vultures. Waiting to see someone get killed.”

The truck drove away, Lora sitting stiff and silent, frightened now. Conger watched for a moment. Then he dashed back into the woods, between the trees, toward the ridge.

He could get away, of course. Anytime he wanted to he could get away. All he had to do was to leap into the crystal cage and turn the handles. But he had a job, an important job. He had to be here, here at this place, at this time.

He reached the cage and opened the door. He went inside and picked up the gun from the shelf. The Slem-gun would take care of them. He notched it up to full count. The chain reaction from it would flatten them all, the police, the curious, sadistic people —

They wouldn't take him! Before they got him, all of them would be dead. *He* would get away. He would escape. By the end of the day they would all be dead, if that was what they wanted, and he —

He saw the skull.

Suddenly he put the gun down. He picked up the skull. He turned the skull over. He looked at the teeth. Then he went to the mirror.

He held the skull up, looking in the mirror. He pressed the skull against his cheek. Beside his own face the grinning skull leered back at him, beside *his* skull, against his living flesh.

He bared his teeth. And he knew.

It was his own skull that he held. He was the one who would die. He was the Founder.

After a time he put the skull down. For a few minutes he stood at the controls, playing with them idly. He could hear the sound of motors outside, the muffled noise of men. Should he go back to the present, where the Speaker waited? He could escape, of course —

Escape?

He turned toward the skull. There it was, his skull, yellow with age. Escape? Escape, when he had held it in his own hands?

What did it matter if he put it off a month, a year, ten years, even fifty? Time was nothing. He had sipped chocolate with a girl born a hundred and fifty years before his time. Escape? For a little while, perhaps.

But he could not *really* escape, no more so than anyone else had ever escaped, or ever would.

Only, he had held it in his hands, his own bones, his own death's-head.

They had not.

He went out the door and across the field, empty handed. There were a lot of them standing around, gathered together, waiting. They expected a good fight; they knew he had something. They had heard about the incident at the fountain.

And there were plenty of police — police with guns and tear gas, creeping across the hills and ridges, between the trees, closer and closer. It was an old story, in this century.

One of the men tossed something at him. It fell in the snow by his feet, and he looked down. It was a rock. He smiled.

"Come on!" one of them called. "Don't you have any bombs?"

"Throw a bomb! You with the beard! Throw a bomb!"

"Let 'em have it!"

“Toss a few A Bombs!”

They began to laugh. He smiled. He put his hands to his hips. They suddenly turned silent, seeing that he was going to speak.

“I’m sorry,” he said simply. “I don’t have any bombs. You’re mistaken.”

There was a flurry of murmuring.

“I have a gun,” he went on. “A very good one. Made by science even more advanced than your own. But I’m not going to use that, either.”

They were puzzled.

“Why not?” someone called. At the edge of the group an older woman was watching. He felt a sudden shock. He had seen her before. Where?

He remembered. The day at the library. As he had turned the corner he had seen her. She had noticed him and been astounded. At the time, he did not understand why.

Conger grinned. So he *would* escape death, the man who right now was voluntarily accepting it. They were laughing, laughing at a man who had a gun but didn’t use it. But by a strange twist of science he would appear again, a few months later, after his bones had been buried under the floor of a jail.

And so, in a fashion, he would escape death. He would die, but then, after a period of months, he would live again, briefly, for an afternoon.

An afternoon. Yet long enough for them to see him, to understand that he was still alive. To know that somehow he had returned to life.

And then, finally, he would appear once more, after two hundred years had passed. Two centuries later.

He would be born again, born, as a matter of fact, in a small trading village on Mars. He would grow up, learning to hunt and trade —

A police car came on the edge of the field and stopped. The people retreated a little. Conger raised his hands.

“I have an odd paradox for you,” he said. “Those who take lives will lose their own. Those who kill, will die. But he who gives his own life away will live again!”

They laughed, faintly, nervously. The police were coming out, walking toward him. He smiled. He had said everything he intended to say. It was a good little paradox he had coined. They would puzzle over it, remember it.

Smiling, Conger awaited a death foreordained.

The Defenders

Taylor sat back in his chair reading the morning newspaper. The warm kitchen and the smell of coffee blended with the comfort of not having to go to work. This was his Rest Period, the first for a long time, and he was glad of it. He folded the second section back, sighing with contentment.

"What is it?" Mary said, from the stove.

"They pasted Moscow again last night." Taylor nodded his head in approval. "Gave it a real pounding. One of those R-H bombs. It's about time."

He nodded again, feeling the full comfort of the kitchen, the presence of his plump, attractive wife, the breakfast dishes and coffee. This was relaxation. And the war news was good, good and satisfying. He could feel a justifiable glow at the news, a sense of pride and personal accomplishment. After all, he was an integral part of the war program, not just another factory worker lugging a cart of scrap, but a technician, one of those who designed and planned the nerve-trunk of the war.

"It says they have the new subs almost perfected. Wait until they get *those* going." He smacked his lips with anticipation. "When they start shelling from underwater, the Soviets are sure going to be surprised."

"They're doing a wonderful job," Mary agreed vaguely. "Do you know what we saw today? Our team is getting a leady to show to the school children. I saw the leady, but only for a moment. It's good for the children to see what their contributions are going for, don't you think?"

She looked around at him.

"A leady," Taylor murmured. He put the newspaper slowly down. "Well, make sure it's decontaminated properly. We don't want to take any

chances.”

“Oh, they always bathe them when they’re brought down from the surface,” Mary said. “They wouldn’t think of letting them down without the bath. Would they?” She hesitated, thinking back. “Don, you know, it makes me remember —”

He nodded. “I know.”

He knew what she was thinking. Once in the very first weeks of the war, before everyone had been evacuated from the surface, they had seen a hospital train discharging the wounded, people who had been showered with sleet. He remembered the way they had looked, the expression on their faces, or as much of their faces as was left. It had not been a pleasant sight.

There had been a lot of that at first, in the early days before the transfer to undersurface was complete. There had been a lot, and it hadn’t been very difficult to come across it.

Taylor looked up at his wife. She was thinking too much about it, the last few months. They all were.

“Forget it,” he said. “It’s all in the past. There isn’t anybody up there now but the leadies, and they don’t mind.”

“But just the same, I hope they’re careful when they let one of them down here. If one were still hot —”

He laughed, pushing himself away from the table. “Forget it. This is a wonderful moment; I’ll be home for the next two shifts. Nothing to do but sit around and take things easy. Maybe we can take in a show. OK?”

“A show? Do we have to? I don’t like to look at all the destruction, the ruins. Sometimes I see some place I remember, like San Francisco. They

showed a shot of San Francisco, the bridge broken and fallen in the water, and I got upset. I don't like to watch."

"But don't you want to know what's going on? No human beings are getting hurt, you know."

"But it's so awful!" Her face was set and strained. "Please, no, Don."

Don Taylor picked up his newspaper sullenly. "All right, but there isn't a hell of a lot else to do. And don't forget, *their* cities are getting it even worse."

She nodded. Taylor turned the rough, thin sheets of newspaper. His good mood had soured on him. Why did she have to fret all the time? They were pretty well off, as things went. You couldn't expect to have everything perfect, living undersurface, with an artificial sun and artificial food. Naturally it was a strain, not seeing the sky or being able to go anyplace or see anything other than metal walls, great roaring factories, the plant-yards, barracks. But it was better than being on surface. And some day it would end and they could return. Nobody *wanted* to live this way, but it was necessary.

He turned the page angrily and the poor paper ripped. Damn it, the paper was getting worse quality all the time, bad print, yellow tint —

Well, they needed everything for the war program. He ought to know that. Wasn't he one of the planners?

He excused himself and went into the other room. The bed was still unmade. They had better get it in shape before the seventh hour inspection. There was a one unit fine —

The vidphone rang. He halted. Who would it be? He went over and clicked it on.

"Taylor?" the face said, forming into place. It was an old face, gray and grim. "This is Moss. I'm sorry to bother you during Rest Period, but this

thing has come up." He rattled papers. "I want you to hurry over here."

Taylor stiffened. "What is it? There's no chance it could wait?" The calm gray eyes were studying him, expressionless, unjudging. "If you want me to come down to the lab," Taylor grumbled, "I suppose I can. I'll get my uniform —"

"No. Come as you are. And not to the lab. Meet me at second stage as soon as possible. It'll take you about a half hour, using the fast car up. I'll see you there."

The picture broke and Moss disappeared.

"What was it?" Mary said, at the door.

"Moss. He wants me for something."

"I knew this would happen."

"Well, you didn't want to do anything, anyhow. What does it matter?" His voice was bitter. "It's all the same, every day. I'll bring you back something. I'm going up to second stage. Maybe I'll be close enough to the surface to —"

"Don't! Don't bring me anything! Not from the surface!"

"All right, I won't. But of all the irrational nonsense —" She watched him put on his boots without answering.

Moss nodded and Taylor fell in step with him, as the older man strode along. A series of loads were going up to the surface, blind cars clanking like ore-trucks up the ramp, disappearing through the stage trap above them. Taylor watched the cars, heavy with tubular machinery of some sort, weapons new to him. Workers were everywhere, in the dark gray uniforms

of the labor corps, loading, lifting, shouting back and forth. The stage was deafening with noise.

“We’ll go up a way,” Moss said, “where we can talk. This is no place to give you details.”

They took an escalator up. The commercial lift fell behind them, and with it most of the crashing and booming. Soon they emerged on an observation platform, suspended on the side of the Tube, the vast tunnel leading to the surface, not more than half a mile above them now.

“My God!” Taylor said, looking down the tube involuntarily. “It’s a long way down.”

Moss laughed. “Don’t look.”

They opened a door and entered an office. Behind the desk, an officer was sitting, an officer of Internal Security. He looked up.

“I’ll be right with you, Moss.” He gazed at Taylor studying him. “You’re a little ahead of time.”

“This is Commander Franks,” Moss said to Taylor. “He was the first to make the discovery. I was notified last night.” He tapped a parcel he carried. “I was let in because of this.”

Franks frowned at him and stood up. “We’re going up to first stage. We can discuss it there.”

“First stage?” Taylor repeated nervously. The three of them went down a side passage to a small lift. “I’ve never been up there. Is it all right? It’s not radioactive, is it?”

“You’re like everyone else,” Franks said. “Old women afraid of burglars. No radiation leaks down to first stage. There’s lead and rock, and

what comes down the Tube is bathed."

"What's the nature of the problem?" Taylor asked. "I'd like to know something about it."

"In a moment."

They entered the lift and ascended. When they stepped out, they were in a hall of soldiers, weapons and uniforms everywhere. Taylor blinked in surprise. So this was first stage, the closest undersurface level to the top! After this stage there was only rock, lead and rock, and the great tubes leading up like the burrows of earthworms. Lead and rock, and above that, where the tubes opened, the great expanse that no living being had seen for eight years, the vast, endless ruin that had once been Man's home, the place where he had lived, eight years ago.

Now the surface was a lethal desert of slag and rolling clouds. Endless clouds drifted back and forth, blotting out the red sun. Occasionally something metallic stirred, moving through the remains of a city, threading its way across the tortured terrain of the countryside. A leady, a surface robot, immune to radiation, constructed with feverish haste in the last months before the cold war became literally hot.

Leadies, crawling along the ground, moving over the oceans or through the skies in slender, blackened craft, creatures that could exist where no *life* could remain, metal and plastic figures that waged a war Man had conceived, but which he could not fight himself. Human beings had invented war, invented and manufactured the weapons, even invented the players, the fighters, the actors of the war. But they themselves could not venture forth, could not wage it themselves. In all the world — in Russia, in Europe, America, Africa — no living human being remained. They were under the surface, in the deep shelters that had been carefully planned and built, even as the first bombs began to fall.

It was a brilliant idea and the only idea that could have worked. Up above, on the ruined, blasted surface of what had once been a living planet,

the leady crawled and scurried and fought Man's war. And undersurface, in the depths of the planet, human beings toiled endlessly to produce the weapons to continue the fight, month by month, year by year.

"First stage," Taylor said. A strange ache went through him. "Almost to the surface."

"But not quite," Moss said.

Franks led them through the soldiers, over to one side, near the lip of the Tube.

"In a few minutes, a lift will bring something down to us from the surface," he explained. "You see, Taylor, every once in a while Security examines and interrogates a surface leady, one that has been above for a time, to find out certain things. A vidcall is sent up and contact is made with a field headquarters. We need this direct interview; we can't depend on vidscreen contact alone. The leadies are doing a good job, but we want to make certain that everything is going the way we want it."

Franks faced Taylor and Moss and continued: "The lift will bring down a leady from the surface, one of the A-class leadies. There's an examination chamber in the next room, with a lead wall in the center, so the interviewing officers won't be exposed to radiation. We find this easier than bathing the leady. It is going right back up; it has a job to get back to.

"Two days ago, an A-class leady was brought down and interrogated. I conducted the session myself. We were interested in a new weapon the Soviets have been using, an automatic mine that pursues anything that moves. Military had sent instructions up that the mine be observed and reported in detail.

"This A-class leady was brought down with information. We learned a few facts from it, obtained the usual roll of film and reports, and then sent it back up. It was going out of the chamber, back to the lift, when a curious thing happened. At the time, I thought —"

Franks broke off. A red light was flashing.

“That down lift is coming.” He nodded to some soldiers. “Let’s enter the chamber. The leady will be along in a moment.”

“An A-class leady,” Taylor said. “I’ve seen them on the showscreens, making their reports.”

“It’s quite an experience,” Moss said. “They’re almost human.”

They entered the chamber and seated themselves behind the lead wall. After a time, a signal was flashed, and Franks made a motion with his hands.

The door beyond the wall opened. Taylor peered through his view slot. He saw something advancing slowly, a slender metallic figure moving on a tread, its arm grips at rest by its sides. The figure halted and scanned the lead wall. It stood, waiting.

“We are interested in learning something,” Franks said. “Before I question you, do you have anything to report on surface conditions?”

“No. The war continues.” The leady’s voice was automatic and toneless. “We are a little short of fast pursuit craft, the single-seat type. We could use also some —”

“That has all been noted. What I want to ask you is this. Our contact with you has been through vidscreen only. We must rely on indirect evidence, since none of us goes above. We can only infer what is going on. We never see anything ourselves. We have to take it all secondhand. Some top leaders are beginning to think there’s too much room for error.”

“Error?” the leady asked. “In what way? Our reports are checked carefully before they’re sent down. We maintain constant contact with you;

everything of value is reported. Any new weapons which the enemy is seen to employ —”

“I realize that,” Franks grunted behind his peep slot. “But perhaps we should see it all for ourselves. Is it possible that there might be a large enough radiation-free area for a human party to ascend to the surface? If a few of us were to come up in lead-lined suits, would we be able to survive long enough to observe conditions and watch things?”

The machine hesitated before answering. “I doubt it. You can check air samples, of course, and decide for yourselves. But in the eight years since you left, things have continually worsened. You cannot have any real idea of conditions up there. It has become difficult for any moving object to survive for long. There are many kinds of projectiles sensitive to movement. The new mine not only reacts to motion, but continues to pursue the object indefinitely, until it finally reaches it. And the radiation is everywhere.”

“I see.” Franks turned to Moss, his eyes narrowed oddly. “Well, that was what I wanted to know. You may go.”

The machine moved back toward its exit. It paused. “Each month the amount of lethal particles in the atmosphere increases. The tempo of the war is gradually —”

“I understand.” Franks rose. He held out his hand and Moss passed him the package. “One thing before you leave. I want you to examine a new type of metal shield material. I’ll pass you a sample with the tong.”

Franks put the package in the toothed grip and revolved the tong so that he held the other end. The package swung down to the leady, which took it. They watched it unwrap the package and take the metal plate in its hands. The leady turned the metal over and over.

Suddenly it became rigid.

“All right,” Franks said.

He put his shoulder against the wall and a section slid aside. Taylor gasped — Franks and Moss were hurrying up to the leady!

“Good God!” Taylor said. “But it’s radioactive!”

The leady stood unmoving, still holding the metal. Soldiers appeared in the chamber. They surrounded the leady and ran a counter across it carefully.

“OK, sir,” one of them said to Franks. “It’s as cold as a long winter evening.”

“Good. I was sure, but I didn’t want to take any chances.”

“You see,” Moss said to Taylor, “this leady isn’t hot at all. Yet it came directly from the surface, without even being bathed.”

“But what does it mean?” Taylor asked blankly.

“It may be an accident,” Franks said. “There’s always the possibility that a given object might escape being exposed above. But this is the second time it’s happened that we know of. There may be others.”

“The second time?”

“The previous interview was when we noticed it. The leady was not hot. It was cold, too, like this one.”

Moss took back the metal plate from the leady’s hands. He pressed the surface carefully and returned it to the stiff, unprotesting fingers.

“We shorted it out with this, so we could get close enough for a thorough check. It’ll come back on in a second now. We had better get behind the wall again.”

They walked back and the lead wall swung closed behind them. The soldiers left the chamber.

“Two periods from now,” Franks said softly, “an initial investigating party will be ready to go surface-side. We’re going up the Tube in suits, up to the top — the first human party to leave undersurface in eight years.”

“It may mean nothing,” Moss said, “but I doubt it. Something’s going on, something strange. The leady told us no life could exist above without being roasted. The story doesn’t fit.”

Taylor nodded. He stared through the peep slot at the immobile metal figure. Already the leady was beginning to stir. It was bent in several places, dented and twisted, and its finish was blackened and charred. It was a leady that had been up there a long time; it had seen war and destruction, ruin so vast that no human being could imagine the extent. It had crawled and slunk in a world of radiation and death, a world where no life could exist.

And Taylor had touched it!

“You’re going with us,” Franks said suddenly. “I want you along. I think the three of us will go.”

Mary faced him with a sick and frightened expression. “I know it. You’re going to the surface. Aren’t you?”

She followed him into the kitchen. Taylor sat down, looking away from her.

“It’s a classified project,” he evaded. “I can’t tell you anything about it.”

“You don’t have to tell me. I know. I knew it the moment you came in. There was something on your face, something I haven’t seen there for a long, long time. It was an old look.”

She came toward him. “But how can they send you to the surface?” She took his face in her shaking hands, making him look at her. There was a strange hunger in her eyes. “Nobody can live up there. Look, look at this!”

She grabbed up a newspaper and held it in front of him.

“Look at this photograph. America, Europe, Asia, Africa — nothing but ruins. We’ve seen it every day on the showscreens. All destroyed, poisoned. And they’re sending you up. Why? No living thing can get by up there, not even a weed, or grass. They’ve wrecked the surface, haven’t they? *Haven’t they?”*

Taylor stood up. “It’s an order. I know nothing about it. I was told to report to join a scout party. That’s all I know.”

He stood for a long time, staring ahead. Slowly, he reached for the newspaper and held it up to the light.

“It looks real,” he murmured. “Ruins, deadness, slag. It’s convincing. All the reports, photographs, films, even air samples. Yet we haven’t seen it for ourselves, not after the first months… .”

“What are you talking about?”

“Nothing.” He put the paper down. “I’m leaving early after the next Sleep Period. Let’s turn in.”

Mary turned away, her face hard and harsh. “Do what you want. We might just as well all go up and get killed at once, instead of dying slowly

down here, like vermin in the ground."

He had not realized how resentful she was. Were they all like that? How about the workers toiling in the factories, day and night, endlessly? The pale, stooped men and women, plodding back and forth to work, blinking in the colorless light, eating synethetics —

"You shouldn't be so bitter," he said.

Mary smiled a little. "I'm bitter because I know you'll never come back." She turned away. "I'll never see you again, once you go up there."

He was shocked. "What? How can you say a thing like that?"

She did not answer.

He awakened with the public newscaster screeching in his ears, shouting outside the building.

"Special news bulletin! Surface forces report enormous Soviets attack with new weapons! Retreat of key groups! All work units report to factories at once!"

Taylor blinked, rubbing his eyes. He jumped out of bed and hurried to the vidphone. A moment later he was put through to Moss.

"Listen," he said. "What about this new attack? Is the project off?" He could see Moss's desk, covered with reports and papers.

"No," Moss said. "We're going right ahead. Get over here at once."

"But —"

"Don't argue with me." Moss held up a handful of surface bulletins, crumpling them savagely. "This is a fake. Come on!" He broke off.

Taylor dressed furiously, his mind in a daze. Half an hour later, he leaped from a fast car and hurried up the stairs into the Synthetics Building. The corridors were full of men and women rushing in every direction. He entered Moss's office.

"There you are," Moss said, getting up immediately. "Franks is waiting for us at the outgoing station."

They went in a Security Car, the siren screaming. Workers scattered out of their way. "What about the attack?" Taylor asked.

Moss braced his shoulders. "We're certain that we've forced their hand. We've brought the issue to a head."

They pulled up at the station link of the Tube and leaped out. A moment later they were moving up at high speed toward the first stage.

They emerged into a bewildering scene of activity. Soldiers were fastening on lead suits, talking excitedly to each other, shouting back and forth. Guns were being given out, instructions passed.

Taylor studied one of the soldiers. He was armed with the dreaded Bender pistol, the new snub-nosed hand weapon that was just beginning to come from the assembly line. Some of the soldiers looked a little frightened.

"I hope we're not making a mistake," Moss said, noticing his gaze.

Franks came toward them. "Here's the program. The three of us are going up first, alone. The soldiers will follow in fifteen minutes."

"What are we going to tell the leadies?" Taylor worriedly asked. "We'll have to tell them something."

“We want to observe the new Soviet attack.” Franks smiled ironically. “Since it seems to be so serious, we should be there in person to witness it.”

“And then what?” Taylor said.

“That’ll be up to them. Let’s go.”

In a small car, they went swiftly up the Tube, carried by anti-grav beams from below. Taylor glanced down from time to time. It was a long way back, and getting longer each moment. He sweated nervously inside his suit, gripping his Bender pistol with inexpert fingers.

Why had they chosen him? Chance, pure chance. Moss had asked him to come along as a Department member. Then Franks had picked him out on the spur of the moment. And now they were rushing toward the surface, faster and faster.

A deep fear, instilled in him for eight years, throbbed in his mind. Radiation, certain death, a world blasted and lethal —

Up and up the car went. Taylor gripped the sides and closed his eyes. Each moment they were closer, the first living creatures to go above above the first stage, up the Tube past the lead and rock, up to the surface. The phobic horror shook him in waves. It was death; they all knew that. Hadn’t they seen it in the films a thousand times? The cities, the sleet coming down, the rolling clouds —

“It won’t be much longer,” Franks said. “We’re almost there. The surface tower is not expecting us. I gave orders that no signal was to be sent.”

The car shot up, rushing furiously. Taylor’s head spun; he hung on, his eyes shut. Up and up… .

The car stopped. He opened his eyes.

They were in a vast room, fluorescent-lit, a cavern filled with equipment and machinery, endless mounds of material piled in row after row. Among the stacks, leadies were working silently, pushing trucks and handcarts.

"Leadies," Moss said. His face was pale. "Then we're really on the surface."

The leadies were going back and forth with equipment moving the vast stores of guns and spare parts, ammunition and supplies that had been brought to the surface. And this was the receiving station for only one Tube; there were many others, scattered throughout the continent.

Taylor looked nervously around him. They were really there, above ground, on the surface. This was where the war was.

"Come on," Franks said. "A B-class guard is coming our way."

They stepped out of the car. A leady was approaching them rapidly. It coasted up in front of them and stopped scanning them with its hand-weapon raised.

"This is Security," Franks said. "Have an A-class sent to me at once."

The leady hesitated. Other B-class guards were coming, scooting across the floor, alert and alarmed. Moss peered around.

"Obey!" Franks said in a loud, commanding voice. "You've been ordered!"

The leady moved uncertainly away from them. At the end of the building, a door slid back. Two Class-A leadies appeared, coming slowly toward them. Each had a green stripe across its front.

"From the Surface Council," Franks whispered tensely. "This is above ground, all right. Get set."

The two leadies approached warily. Without speaking, they stopped close by the men, looking them up and down.

“I’m Franks of Security. We came from undersurface in order to —”

“This is incredible,” one leady interrupted him coldly. “You know you can’t live up here. The whole surface is lethal to you. You can’t possibly remain on the surface.”

“These suits will protect us,” Franks said. “In any case, it’s not your responsibility. What I want is an immediate Council meeting so I can acquaint myself with conditions, with the situation here. Can that be arranged?”

“You human beings can’t survive up here. And the new Soviet attack is directed at this area. It is in considerable danger.”

“We know that. Please assemble the Council.” Franks looked around him at the vast room, lit by recessed lamps in the ceiling. An uncertain quality came into his voice. “Is it night or day right now?”

“Night,” one of the A-class leadies said, after a pause. “Dawn is coming in about two hours.”

Franks nodded. “We’ll remain at least two hours, then. As a concession to our sentimentality, would you please show us some place where we can observe the sun as it comes up? We would appreciate it.”

A stir went through the leadies.

“It is an unpleasant sight,” one of the leadies said. “You’ve seen the photographs; you know what you’ll witness. Clouds of drifting particles blot out the light, slag heaps are everywhere, the whole land is destroyed.

For you it will be a staggering sight, much worse than pictures and film can convey."

"However it may be, we'll stay long enough to see it. Will you give the order to the Council?"

"Come this way." Reluctantly, the two leadies coasted toward the wall of the warehouse. The three men trudged after them, their heavy shoes ringing against the concrete. At the wall, the two leadies paused.

"This is the entrance to the Council Chamber. There are windows in the Chamber Room, but it is still dark outside, of course. You'll see nothing right now, but in two hours —"

"Open the door," Franks said.

The door slid back. They went slowly inside. The room was small, a neat room with a round table in the center, chairs ringing it. The three of them sat down silently, and the two leadies followed after them, taking their places.

"The other Council Members are on their way. They have already been notified and are coming as quickly as they can. Again I urge you to go back down." The leady surveyed the three human beings. "There is no way you can meet the conditions up here. Even we survive with some trouble, ourselves. How can you expect to do it?" The leader approached Franks.

"This astonishes and perplexes us," it said. "Of course we must do what you tell us, but allow me to point out that if you remain here —"

"We know," Franks said impatiently. "However, we intend to remain, at least until sunrise."

"If you insist."

There was silence. The leadies seemed to be conferring with each other, although the three men heard no sound.

"For your own good," the leader said at last, "you must go back down. We have discussed this, and it seems to us that you are doing the wrong thing for your own good."

"We are human beings," Franks said sharply. "Don't you understand? We're men, not machines."

"That is precisely why you must go back. This room is radioactive; all surface areas are. We calculate that your suits will not protect you for over fifty more minutes. Therefore —"

The leadies moved abruptly toward the men, wheeling in a circle, forming a solid row. The men stood up, Taylor reaching awkwardly for his weapon, his fingers numb and stupid. The men stood facing the silent metal figures.

"We must insist," the leader said, its voice without emotion. "We must take you back to the Tube and send you down on the next car. I am sorry, but it is necessary."

"What'll we do?" Moss said nervously to Franks. He touched his gun. "Shall we blast them?"

Franks shook his head. "All right," he said to the leader. "We'll go back."

He moved toward the door, motioning Taylor and Moss to follow him. They looked at him in surprise, but they came with him. The leadies followed them out into the great warehouse. Slowly they moved toward the Tube entrance, none of them speaking.

At the lip, Franks turned. “We are going back because we have no choice. There are three of us and about a dozen of you. However, if —”

“Here comes the car,” Taylor said.

There was a grating sound from the Tube. D-class leadies moved toward the edge to receive it.

“I am sorry,” the leader said, “but it is for your protection. We are watching over you, literally. You must stay below and let us conduct the war. In a sense, it has come to be *our* war. We must fight it as we see fit.”

The car rose to the surface.

Twelve soldiers, armed with Bender pistols, stepped from it and surrounded the three men.

Moss breathed a sigh of relief. “Well, this does change things. It came off just right.”

The leader moved back, away from the soldiers. It studied them intently, glancing from one to the next, apparently trying to make up its mind. At last it made a sign to the other leadies. They coasted aside and a corridor was opened up toward the warehouse.

“Even now,” the leader said, “we could send you back by force. But it is evident that this is not really an observation party at all. These soldiers show that you have much more in mind; this was all carefully prepared.”

“Very carefully,” Franks said.

They closed in.

“How much more, we can only guess. I must admit that we were taken unprepared. We failed utterly to meet the situation. Now force would be

absurd, because neither side can afford to injure the other; we, because of the restrictions placed on us regarding human life, you because the war demands —”

The soldiers fired, quick and in fright. Moss dropped to one knee, firing up. The leader dissolved in a cloud of particles. On all sides D-and B-class leadies were rushing up, some with weapons, some with metal slats. The room was in confusion. Off in the distance a siren was screaming. Franks and Taylor were cut off from the others, separated from the soldiers by a wall of metal bodies.

“They can’t fire back,” Franks said calmly. “This is another bluff. They’ve tried to bluff us all the way.” He fired into the face of a leady. The leady dissolved. “They can only try to frighten us. Remember that.”

They went on firing and leady after leady vanished. The room reeked with the smell of burning metal, the stink of fused plastic and steel. Taylor had been knocked down. He was struggling to find his gun, reaching wildly among metal legs, groping frantically to find it. His fingers strained, a handle swam in front of him. Suddenly something came down on his arm, a metal foot. He cried out.

Then it was over. The leadies were moving away, gathering together off to one side. Only four of the Surface Council remained. The others were radioactive particles in the air. D-class leadies were already restoring order, gathering up partly destroyed metal figures and bits and removing them.

Franks breathed a shuddering sigh.

“All right,” he said. “You can take us back to the windows. It won’t be long now.”

The leadies separated, and the human group, Moss and Franks.and Taylor and the soldiers, walked slowly across the room, toward the door.

They entered the Council Chamber. Already a faint touch of gray mitigated the blackness of the windows.

“Take us outside,” Franks said impatiently. “We’ll see it directly, not in here.”

A door slid open. A chill blast of cold morning air rushed in, chilling them even through their lead suits. The men glanced at each other uneasily.

“Come on,” Franks said. “Outside.”

He walked out through the door, the others following him.

They were on a hill, overlooking the vast bowl of a valley. Dimly, against the graying sky, the outline of mountains were forming, becoming tangible.

“It’ll be bright enough to see in a few minutes,” Moss said. He shuddered as a chilling wind caught him and moved around him. “It’s worth it, really worth it, to see this again after eight years. Even if it’s the last thing we see —”

“Watch,” Franks snapped.

They obeyed, silent and subdued. The sky was clearing, brightening each moment. Some place far off, echoing across the valley, a rooster crowed.

“A chicken!” Taylor murmured. “Did you hear?”

Behind them, the leadies had come out and were standing silently, watching, too. The gray sky turned to white and the hills appeared more clearly. Light spread across the valley floor, moving toward them.

“God in heaven!” Franks exclaimed.

Trees, trees and forests. A valley of plants and trees, with a few roads winding among them. Farmhouses. A windmill. A barn, far down below them.

“Look!” Moss whispered.

Color came into the sky. The sun was approaching. Birds began to sing. Not far from where they stood, the leaves of a tree danced in the wind.

Franks turned to the row of leadies behind them.

“Eight years. We were tricked. There was no war. As soon as we left the surface —”

“Yes,” an A-class leady admitted. “As soon as you left, the war ceased. You’re right, it was a hoax. You worked hard undersurface, sending up guns and weapons, and we destroyed them as fast as they came up.”

“But why?” Taylor asked, dazed. He stared down at the vast valley below, “Why?”

“You created us,” the leady said, “to pursue the war for you, while you human beings went below the ground in order to survive. But before we could continue the war, it was necessary to analyze it to determine what its purpose was. We did this, and we found that it had no purpose, except, perhaps, in terms of human needs. Even this was questionable.

“We investigated further. We found that human cultures pass through phases, each culture in its own time. As the culture ages and begins to lose its objectives, conflict arises within it between those who wish to cast it off and set up a new culture-pattern, and those who wish to retain the old with as little change as possible.

“At this point, a great danger appears. The conflict within threatens to engulf the society in self-war, group against group. The vital traditions may be lost — not merely altered or reformed, but completely destroyed in this period of chaos and anarchy. We have found many such examples in the history of mankind.

“It is necessary for this hatred within the culture to be directed outward, toward an external group, so that the culture itself may survive its crisis. War is the result. War, to a logical mind, is absurd. But in terms of human needs, it plays a vital role. And it will continue to until Man has grown up enough so that no hatred lies within him.”

Taylor was listening intently. “Do you think this time will come?”

“Of course. It has almost arrived now. This is the last war. Man is *almost* united into one final culture — a world culture. At this point he stands continent against continent, one half of the world against the other half. Only a single step remains, the jump to a unified culture. Man has climbed slowly upward, tending always toward unification of his culture. It will not be long —

“But it has not come yet, and so the war had to go on, to satisfy the last violent surge of hatred that Man felt. Eight years have passed since the war began. In these eight years, we have observed and noted important changes going on in the minds of men. Fatigue and disinterest, we have seen, are gradually taking the place of hatred and fear. The hatred is being exhausted gradually, over a period of time. But for the present, the hoax must go on, at least for a while longer. You are not ready to learn the truth. You would want to continue the war.”

“But how did you manage it?” Moss asked. “All the photographs, the samples, the damaged equipment —”

“Come over here.” The leady directed them toward along, low building. “Work goes on constantly, whole staffs laboring to maintain a coherent and convincing picture of a global war.”

They entered the building. Leadies were working everywhere, poring over tables and desks.

“Examine this project here,” the A-class leady said. Two leadies were carefully photographing something, an elaborate model on a table top. “It is a good example.”

The men grouped around, trying to see. It was a model of a ruined city.

Taylor studied it in silence for a long time. At last he looked up.

“It’s San Francisco,” he said in a low voice. “This is a model of San Francisco, destroyed. I saw this on the vidscreen, piped down to us. The bridges were hit —”

“Yes, notice the bridges.” The leady traced the ruined span with his metal finger, a tiny spider-web, almost invisible.

“You have no doubt seen photographs of this many times, and of the other tables in this building.

“San Francisco itself is completely intact. We restored it soon after you left, rebuilding the parts that had been damaged at the start of the war. The work of manufacturing news goes on all the time in this particular building. We are very careful to see that each part fits in with all the other parts. Much time and effort are devoted to it.”

Franks touched one of the tiny model buildings, lying half in ruins. “So this is what you spend your time doing — making model cities and then blasting them.”

“No, we do much more. We are caretakers, watching over the whole world. The owners have left for a time, and we must see that the cities are kept clean, that decay is prevented, that everything is kept oiled and in

running condition. The gardens, the streets, the water mains, everything must be maintained as it was eight years ago, so that when the owners return, they will not be displeased. We want to be sure that they will be completely satisfied."

Franks tapped Moss on the arm.

"Come over here," he said in a low voice. "I want to talk to you."

He led Moss and Taylor out of the building, away from the leadies, outside on the hillside. The soldiers followed them. The sun was up and the sky was turning blue. The air smelled sweet and good, the smell of growing things.

Taylor removed his helmet and took a deep breath.

"I haven't smelled that smell for a long tune," he said.

"Listen," Franks said, his voice low and hard. "We must get back down at once. There's a lot to get started on. All this can be turned to our advantage."

"What do you mean?" Moss asked.

"It's a certainty that the Soviets have been tricked, too, the same as us. But *we* have found out. That gives us an edge over them."

"I see." Moss nodded. "We know, but they don't. Their Surface Council has sold out, the same as ours. It works against them the same way. But if we could —"

"With a hundred top-level men, we could take over again, restore things as they should be! It would be easy!"

Moss touched him on the arm. An A-class leady was coming from the building toward them.

“We’ve seen enough,” Franks said, raising his voice. “All this is very serious. It must be reported below and a study made to determine our policy.”

The leady said nothing.

Franks waved to the soldiers. “Let’s go.” He started toward the warehouse.

Most of the soldiers had removed their helmets. Some of them had taken their lead suits off, too, and were relaxing comfortably in their cotton uniforms. They stared around them, down the hillside at the trees and bushes, the vast expanse of green, the mountains and the sky.

“Look at the sun,” one of them murmured.

“It sure is bright as hell,” another said.

“We’re going back down,” Franks said. “Fall in by twos and follow us.”

Reluctantly, the soldiers regrouped. The leadies watched without emotion as the men marched slowly back toward the warehouse. Franks and Moss and Taylor led them across the ground, glancing alertly at the leadies as they walked.

They entered the warehouse. D-class leadies were loading material and weapons on surface carts. Cranes and derricks were working busily everywhere. The work was done with efficiency, but without hurry or excitement.

The men stopped, watching. Leadies operating the little carts moved past them, signaling silently to each other. Guns and parts were being

hoisted by magnetic cranes and lowered gently onto waiting carts. “Come on,” Franks said.

He turned toward the lip of the Tube. A row of D-class leadies was standing in front of it, immobile and silent. Franks stopped, moving back. He looked around. An A-class leady was coming toward him.

“Tell them to get out of the way,” Franks said. He touched his gun. “You had better move them.”

Time passed, an endless moment, without measure. The men stood, nervous and alert, watching the row of leadies in front of them.

“As you wish,” the A-class leady said. It signaled and the D-class leadies moved into life. They stepped slowly aside.

Moss breathed a sigh of relief.

“I’m glad that’s over,” he said to Franks. “Look at them all. Why don’t they try to stop us? They must know what we’re going to do.”

Franks laughed. “Stop us? You saw what happened when they tried to stop us before. They can’t; they’re only machines. We built them so they can’t lay hands on us, and they know that.”

His voice trailed off.

The men stared at the Tube entrance. Around them the leadies watched, silent and impassive, their metal faces expressionless.

For a long time the men stood without moving. At last Taylor turned away.

“Good God,” he said. He was numb, without feeling of any kind.

The Tube was gone. It was sealed shut, fused over. Only a dull surface of cooling metal greeted them.

The Tube had been closed.

Franks turned, his face pale and vacant.

The A-class leady shifted. “As you can see, the Tube has been shut. We were prepared for this. As soon as all of you were on the surface, the order was given. If you had gone back when we asked you, you would now be safely down below. We had to work quickly because it was such an immense operation.”

“But why?” Moss demanded angrily.

“Because it is unthinkable that you should be allowed to resume the war. With all the Tubes sealed, it will be many months before forces from below can reach the surface, let alone organize a military program. By that time the cycle will have entered its last stages. You will not be so perturbed to find your world intact.

“We had hoped that you would be undersurface when the sealing occurred. Your presence here is a nuisance. When the Soviets broke through, we were able to accomplish their sealing without —”

“The Soviets? They broke through?”

“Several months ago, they came up unexpectedly to see why the war had not been won. We were forced to act with speed. At this moment they are desperately attempting to cut new Tubes to the surface, to resume the war. We have, however, been able to seal each new one as it appears.”

The leady regarded the three men calmly.

“We’re cut off,” Moss said, trembling. “We can’t get back. What’ll we do?”

“How did you manage to seal the Tube so quickly?” Franks asked the leady. “We’ve been up here only two hours.”

“Bombs are placed just above the first stage of each Tube for such emergencies. They are heat bombs. They fuse lead and rock.”

Gripping the handle of his gun, Franks turned to Moss and Taylor.

“What do you say? We can’t go back, but we can do a lot of damage, the fifteen of us. We have Bender guns. How about it?”

He looked around. The soldiers had wandered away again, back toward the exit of the building. They were standing outside, looking at the valley and the sky. A few of them were carefully climbing down the slope.

“Would you care to turn over your suits and guns?” the A-class leady asked politely. “The suits are uncomfortable and you’ll have no need for weapons. The Russians have given up theirs, as you can see.”

Fingers tensed on triggers. Four men in Russian uniforms were coming toward them from an aircraft that they suddenly realized had landed silently some distance away.

“Let them have it!” Franks shouted.

“They are unarmed,” said the leady. “We brought them here so you could begin peace talks.”

“We have no authority to speak for our country,” Moss said stiffly.

“We do not mean diplomatic discussions,” the leady explained. “There will be no more. The working out of daily problems of existence will teach

you how to get along in the same world. It will not be easy, but it will be done."

The Russians halted and they faced each other with raw hostility.

"I am Colonel Borodoy and I regret giving up our guns," the senior Russian said. "You could have been the first Americans to be killed in almost eight years."

"Or the first Americans to kill," Franks corrected.

"No one would know of it except yourselves," the leady pointed out. "It would be useless heroism. Your real concern should be surviving on the surface. We have no food for you, you know."

Taylor put his gun in its holster. "They've done a neat job of neutralizing us, damn them. I propose we move into a city, start raising crops with the help of some leadies, and generally make ourselves comfortable." Drawing his lips tight over his teeth, he glared at the A-class leady.

"Until our families can come up from undersurface, it's going to be pretty lonesome, but we'll have to manage."

"If I may make a suggestion," said another Russian uneasily. "We tried living in a city. It is too empty. It is also too hard to maintain for so few people. We finally settled in the most modern village we could find."

"Here in this country," a third Russian blurted. "We have much to learn from you."

The Americans abruptly found themselves laughing.

"You probably have a thing or two to teach us yourselves," said Taylor generously, "though I can't imagine what."

The Russian colonel grinned. “Would you join us in our village? It would make our work easier and give us company.”

“Your village?” snapped Franks. “It’s American, isn’t it? It’s ours!”

The leady stepped between them. “When our plans are completed, the term will be interchangeable. ‘Ours’ will eventually mean mankind’s.” It pointed at the aircraft, which was warming up. “The ship is waiting. Will you join each other in making a new home?”

The Russians waited while the Americans made up their minds.

“I see what the leadies mean about diplomacy becoming outmoded,” Franks said at last. “People who work together don’t need diplomats. They solve their problems on the operational level instead of at a conference table.”

The leady led them toward the ship. “It is the goal of history, unifying the world. From family to tribe to city-state to nation to hemisphere, the direction has been toward unification. Now the hemispheres will be joined and —”

Taylor stopped listening and glanced back at the location of the Tube. Mary was undersurface there. He hated to leave her, even though he couldn’t see her again until the Tube was unsealed. But then he shrugged and followed the others.

If this tiny amalgam of former enemies was a good example, it wouldn’t be too long before he and Mary and the rest of humanity would be living on the surface like rational human beings instead of blindly hating moles.

“It has taken thousands of generations to achieve,” the A-class leady concluded. “Hundreds of centuries of bloodshed and destruction. But each war was a step toward uniting mankind. And now the end is in sight: a

world without war. But even that is only the beginning of a new stage of history."

"The conquest of space," breathed Colonel Borodoy.

"The meaning of life," Moss added.

"Eliminating hunger and poverty," said Taylor.

The leady opened the door of the ship. "All that and more. How much more? We cannot foresee it any more than the first men who formed a tribe could foresee this day. But it will be unimaginably great."

The door closed and the ship took off toward their new home.

Mr. Spaceship

Kramer leaned back. “You can see the situation. How can we deal with a factor like this? The perfect variable.”

“Perfect? Prediction should still be possible. A living thing still acts from necessity, the same as inanimate material. But the cause-effect chain is more subtle; there are more factors to be considered. The difference is quantitative, I think. The reaction of the living organism parallels natural causation, but with greater complexity.”

Gross and Kramer looked up at the board plates, suspended on the wall, still dripping, the images hardening into place. Kramer traced a line with his pencil.

“See that? It’s a pseudopodium. They’re alive, and so far, a weapon we can’t beat. No mechanical system can compete with that, simple or intricate. We’ll have to scrap the Johnson Control and find something else.”

“Meanwhile the war continues as it is. Stalemate. Checkmate. They can’t get to us, and we can’t get through their living minefield.”

Kramer nodded. “It’s a perfect defense, for them. But there still might be one answer.”

“What’s that?”

“Wait a minute.” Kramer turned to his rocket expert, sitting with the charts and files. “The heavy cruiser that returned this week. It didn’t actually touch, did it? It came close but there was no contact.”

“Correct.” The expert nodded. “The mine was twenty miles off. The cruiser was in space-drive, moving directly toward Proxima, line-straight, using the Johnson Control, of course. It had deflected a quarter of an hour

earlier for reasons unknown. Later it resumed its course. That was when they got it."

"It shifted," Kramer said. "But not enough. The mine was coming along after it, trailing it. It's the same old story, but I wonder about the contact."

"Here's our theory," the expert said. "We keep looking for contact, a trigger in the pseudopodium. But more likely we're witnessing a psychological phenomena, a decision without any physical correlative. We're watching for something that isn't there. The mine *decides* to blow up. It sees our ship, approaches, and then decides."

"Thanks." Kramer turned to Gross. "Well, that confirms what I'm saying. How can a ship guided by automatic relays escape a mine that decides to explode? The whole theory of mine penetration is that you must avoid tripping the trigger. But here the trigger is a state of mind in a complicated, developed lifeform."

"The belt is fifty thousand miles deep," Gross added. "It solves another problem for them, repair and maintenance. The damn things reproduce, fill up the spaces by spawning into them. I wonder what they feed on?"

"Probably the remains of our first-line. The big cruisers must be a delicacy. It's a game of wits, between a living creature and a ship piloted by automatic relays. The ship always loses." Kramer opened a folder. "I'll tell you what I suggest."

"Go on," Gross said. "I've already heard ten solutions today. What's yours?"

"Mine is very simple. These creatures are superior to any mechanical system, but only because they're alive. Almost any other lifeform could compete with them, any higher lifeform. If the yuks can put out living mines to protect their planets, we ought to be able to harness some of our

own lifeforms in a similar way. Let’s make use of the same weapon ourselves.”

“Which lifeform do you propose to use?”

“I think the human brain is the most agile of known living forms. Do you know of any better?”

“But no human being can withstand outspace travel. A human pilot would be dead of heart failure long before the ship got anywhere near Proxima.”

“But we don’t need the whole body,” Kramer said. “We need only the brain.”

“What?”

“The problem is to find a person of high intelligence who would contribute, in the same manner that eyes and arms are volunteered.”

“But a brain…”

“Technically, it could be done. Brains have been transferred several times, when body destruction made it necessary. Of course, to a spaceship, to a heavy outspace cruiser, instead of an artificial body, that’s new.”

The room was silent.

“It’s quite an idea,” Gross said slowly. His heavy square face twisted. “But even supposing it might work, the big question is *whose* brain?”

It was all very confusing, the reasons for the war, the nature of the enemy. The Yucconae had been contacted on one of the outlying planets of Proxima Centauri. At the approach of the Terran ship, a host of dark slim pencils had lifted abruptly and shot off into the distance. The first real

encounter came between three of the yuk pencils and a single exploration ship from Terra. No terrans survived. After that it was all out war, with no holds barred.

Both sides feverishly constructed defense rings around their systems. Of the two, the Yucconae belt was the better. The ring around Proxima was a living ring, superior to anything Terra could throw against it. The standard equipment by which Terran ships were guided in outspace, the Johnson Control, was not adequate. Something more was needed. Automatic relays were not good enough.

Not good at all, Kramer thought to himself, as he stood looking down the hillside at the work going on below him. A warm wind blew along the hill, rustling the weeds and grass. At the bottom, in the valley, the mechanics had almost finished; the last elements of the reflex system had been removed from the ship and crated up.

All that was needed now was the new core, the new central key that would take the place of the mechanical system. A human brain, the brain of an intelligent, wary human being. But would the human being part with it? That was the problem.

Kramer turned. Two people were approaching him along the road, a man and a woman. The man was Gross, expressionless, heavyset, walking with dignity. The woman was — He stared in surprise and growing annoyance. It was Dolores, his wife. Since they'd separated he had seen little of her…

"Kramer," Gross said. "Look who I ran into. Came back down with us. We're going into town."

"Hello, Phil," Dolores said. "Well, aren't you glad to see me?"

He nodded. "How have you been? You're looking fine." She was still pretty and slender in her uniform, the blue-gray of Internal Security, Gross's

organization.

“Thanks.” She smiled. “You seem to be doing all right, too. Commander Gross tells me that you’re responsible for this project, Operation Head, as they call it. Whose head have you decided on?”

“That’s the problem.” Kramer lit a cigarette. “This ship is to be equipped with a human brain instead of the Johnson system. We’ve constructed special draining baths for the brain, electronic relays to catch the impulses and magnify them, a continual feeding duct that supplies the living cells with everything they need. But —”

“But we still haven’t got the brain itself,” Gross finished. They began to walk back toward the car. “If we can get that we’ll be ready for the tests.”

“Will the brain remain alive?” Dolores asked. “Is it actually going to live as part of the ship?”

“It will be alive, but not conscious. Very little life is actually conscious. Animals, trees, insects are quick in their responses, but they aren’t conscious. In this process of ours the individual personality, the ego, will cease. We only need the response ability, nothing more.”

Dolores shuddered. “How terrible!”

“In time of war everything must be tried,” Kramer said absently. “If one life sacrificed will end the war it’s worth it. This ship might get through. A couple more like it and there wouldn’t be any more war.”

They got into the car. As they drove down the road, Gross said, “Have you thought of anyone yet?”

Kramer shook his head. “That’s out of my line.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’m an engineer. It’s not in my department.”

“But all this was your idea.”

“My work ends there.”

Gross was staring at him oddly. Kramer shifted uneasily.

“Then who is supposed to do it?” Gross said. “I can have my organization prepare examinations of various kinds, to determine fitness, that kind of thing —”

“Listen, Phil,” Dolores said suddenly.

“What?”

She turned toward him. “I have an idea. Do you remember that professor we had in college? Michael Thomas?”

Kramer nodded.

“I wonder if he’s still alive.” Dolores frowned. “If he is he must be awfully old.”

“Why, Dolores?” Gross asked.

“Perhaps an old person who didn’t have much time left, but whose mind was still clear and sharp —”

“Professor Thomas,” Kramer rubbed his jaw. “He certainly was a wise old duck. But could he still be alive? He must have been seventy, then.”

“We could find that out,” Gross said. “I could make a routine check.”

“What do you think?” Dolores said. “If any human mind could outwit those creatures —”

“I don’t like the idea,” Kramer said. In his mind an image had appeared, the image of an old man sitting being a desk, his bright gentle eyes moving about the classroom. The old man leaning forward, a thin hand raised — “Keep him out of this,” Kramer said.

“What’s wrong?” Gross looked at him curiously.

“It’s because *I* suggested it,” Dolores said.

“No.” Kramer shook his head. “It’s not that. I didn’t expect anything like this, somebody I knew, a man I studied under. I remember him very clearly. He was a very distinct personality.”

“Good,” Gross said. “He sounds fine.”

“We can’t do it. We’re asking his death!”

“This is war,” Gross said, “and war doesn’t wait on the needs of the individual. You said that yourself. Surely he’ll volunteer; we can keep it on that basis.”

“He may already be dead,” Dolores murmured.

“We’ll find that out,” Gross said, speeding up the car. They drove the rest of the way in silence.

For a long time the two of them stood studying the small wood house, overgrown with ivy, set back on the lot behind the enormous oak. The little town was silent and sleepy; once in a while a car moved slowly along the distant highway, but that was all.

“This is the place,” Gross said to Kramer. He folded his arms. “Quite a quaint little house.”

Kramer said nothing. The two Security Agents behind them were expressionless.

Gross started toward the gate. “Let’s go. According to the check he’s still alive, but very sick. His mind is agile, however. That seems to be certain. It’s said he doesn’t leave the house. A woman takes care of his needs. He’s very frail.”

They went down the stone walk and up onto the porch. Gross rang the bell. They waited. After a time they heard slow footsteps. The door opened. An elderly woman in a shapeless wrapper studied them impassively.

“Security,” Gross said, showing his card. “We wish to see Professor Thomas.”

“Why?”

“Government business.” He glanced at Kramer.

Kramer stepped forward. “I was a pupil of the Professor’s,” he said. “I’m sure he won’t mind seeing us.”

The woman hesitated uncertainly. Gross stepped into the doorway. “All right, mother. This is war time. We can’t stand out here.”

The two Security Agents followed him, and Kramer came reluctantly behind, closing the door. Gross stalked down the hall until he came to an open door. He stopped, looking in. Kramer could see the white corner of a bed, a wooden post and the edge of a dresser. He joined Gross.

In the dark room a withered old man lay, propped up on endless pillows. At first it seemed as if he were asleep; there was no motion or sign of life.

But after a time Kramer saw with a faint shock that the old man was watching them, intently, his eyes fixed on them, unmoving, unwinking.

“Professor Thomas?” Gross said. “I’m Commander Gross of Security. This man with me is perhaps known to you —”

The faded eyes fixed on Kramer.

“I know him. Philip Kramer… You’ve grown heavier, boy.” The voice was feeble, the rustle of dry ashes. “Is it true you’re married now?”

“Yes. I married Dolores French. You remember her.” Kramer came toward the bed. “But we’re separated. It didn’t work out very well. Our careers —”

“What we came here about, Professor,” Gross began, but Kramer cut him off with an impatient wave.

“Let me talk. Can’t you and your men get out of here long enough to let me talk to him?”

Gross swallowed. “All right, Kramer.” He nodded to the two men. The three of them left the room, going out into the hall and closing the door after them.

The old man in the bed watched Kramer silently. “I don’t think much of him,” he said at last. “I’ve seen his type before. What’s he want?”

“Nothing. He just came along. Can I sit down?” Kramer found a stiff upright chair beside the bed. “If I’m bothering you —”

“No. I’m glad to see you again, Philip. After so long. I’m sorry your marriage didn’t work out.”

“How have you been?”

“I’ve been very ill. I’m afraid that my moment on the world’s stage has almost ended.” The ancient eyes studied the younger man reflectively. “You look as if you have been doing well. Like everyone else I thought highly of. You’ve gone to the top in this society.”

Kramer smiled. Then he became serious. “Professor, there’s a project we’re working on that I want to talk to you about. It’s the first ray of hope we’ve had in this whole war. If it works, we may be able to crack the yuk defenses, get some ships into their system. If we can do that the war might be brought to an end.”

“Go on. Tell me about it, if you wish.”

“It’s a long shot, this project. It may not work at all, but we have to give it a try.”

“It’s obvious that you came here because of it,” Professor Thomas murmured. “I’m becoming curious. Go on.”

After Kramer finished the old man lay back in the bed without speaking. At last he sighed.

“I understand. A human mind, taken out of a human body.” He sat up a little, looking at Kramer. “I suppose you’re thinking of me.”

Kramer said nothing.

“Before I make my decision, I want to see the papers on this, the theory and outline of construction. I’m not sure I like it. — For reasons of my own, I mean. But I want to look at the material. If you’ll do that —”

“Certainly.” Kramer stood up and went to the door. Gross and the two Security Agents were standing outside, waiting tensely. “Gross, come inside.”

They filed into the room.

“Give the Professor the papers,” Kramer said. “He wants to study them before deciding.”

Gross brought the file out of his coat pocket, a manila envelope. He handed it to the old man on the bed. “Here it is, Professor. You’re welcome to examine it. Will you give us your answer as soon as possible? We’re very anxious to begin, of course.”

“I’ll give you my answer when I’ve decided.” He took the envelope with a thin, trembling hand. “My decision depends on what I find out from these papers. If I don’t like what I find, then I will not become involved with this work in any shape or form.” He opened the envelope with shaking hands. “I’m looking for one thing.”

“What is it?” Gross said.

“That’s my affair. Leave me a number by which I can reach you when I’ve decided.”

Silently, Gross put his card down on the dresser. As they went out Professor Thomas was already reading the first of the papers, the outline of the theory.

Kramer sat across from Dale Winter, his second in line. “What then?” Winter said.

“He’s going to contact us.” Kramer scratched with a drawing pen on some paper. “I don’t know what to think.”

“What do you mean?” Winter’s good-natured face was puzzled.

“Look.” Kramer stood up, pacing back and forth, his hands in his uniform pockets. “He was my teacher in college. I respected him as a man, as well as a teacher. He was more than a voice, a talking book. He was a person, a calm, kindly person I could look up to. I always wanted to be like him, someday. Now look at me.”

“So?”

“Look at what I’m asking. I’m asking for his life, as if he were some kind of laboratory animal kept around in a cage, not a man, a teacher at all.”

“Do you think he’ll do it?”

“I don’t know.” Kramer went to the window. He stood looking out. “In a way, I hope not.”

“But if he doesn’t —”

“Then we’ll have to find somebody else, I know. There would be somebody else. Why did Dolores have to —”

The vidphone rang. Kramer pressed the button.

“This is Gross.” The heavy features formed. “The old man called me. Professor Thomas.”

“What did he say?” He knew; he could tell already, by the sound of Gross’s voice.

“He said he’d do it. I was a little surprised myself, but apparently he means it. We’ve already made arrangements for his admission to the hospital. His lawyer is drawing up the statement of liability.”

Kramer only half heard. He nodded wearily. “All right. I’m glad. I suppose we can go ahead, then.”

“You don’t sound very glad.”

“I wonder why he decided to go ahead with it.”

“He was very certain about it.” Gross sounded pleased. “He called me quite early. I was still in bed. You know, this calls for a celebration.”

“Sure,” Kramer said. “It sure does.”

Toward the middle of August, the project neared completion. They stood outside in the hot autumn heat, looking up at the sleek metal sides of the ship.

Gross thumped the metal with his hand. “Well, it won’t be long. We can begin the test any time.”

“Tell us more about this,” an officer in gold braid said. “It’s such an unusual concept.”

“Is there really a human brain inside the ship?” a dignitary asked, a small man in a rumpled suit. “And the brain is actually alive?”

“Gentlemen, this ship is guided by a living brain instead of the usual Johnson relay-control system. But the brain is not conscious. It will function by reflex only. The practical difference between it and the Johnson system is this: a human brain is far more intricate than any man-made structure, and its ability to adapt itself to a situation, to respond to danger, is far beyond anything that could be artificially built.”

Gross paused, cocking his ear. The turbines of the ship were beginning to rumble, shaking the ground under them with a deep vibration. Kramer was standing a short distance away from the others, his arms folded,

watching silently. At the sound of the turbines he walked quickly around the ship to the other side. A few workmen were clearing away the last of the waste, the scraps of wiring and scaffolding. They glanced up at him and went on hurriedly with their work. Kramer mounted the ramp and entered the control cabin of the ship. Winter was sitting at the controls with a Pilot from Space-transport.

"How's it look?" Kramer asked.

"All right." Winter got up. "He tells me that it would be best to take off manually. The robot controls —" Winter hesitated. "I mean, the built-in controls, can take over later on in space."

"That's right," the Pilot said. "It's customary with the Johnson system, and so in this case we should —"

"Can you tell anything yet?" Kramer asked.

"No," the Pilot said slowly. "I don't think so. I've been going over everything. It seems to be in good order. There's only one thing I wanted to ask you about." He put his hand on the control board. "There are some changes here I don't understand."

"Changes?"

"Alterations from the original design. I wonder what the purpose is."

Kramer took a set of the plans from his coat. "Let me look." He turned the pages over. The Pilot watched carefully over his shoulder.

"The changes aren't indicated on your copy," the Pilot said. "I wonder —" He stopped. Commander Gross had entered the control cabin.

"Gross, who authorized alterations?" Kramer said. "Some of the wiring has been changed."

“Why, your old friend.” Gross signaled to the field tower through the window.

“My old friend?”

“The Professor. He took quite an active interest.” Gross turned to the Pilot. “Let’s get going. We have to take this out past gravity for the test, they tell me. Well, perhaps it’s for the best. Are you ready?”

“Sure.” The Pilot sat down and moved some of the controls around. “Any time.”

“Go ahead, then,” Gross said.

“The Professor —” Kramer began, but at that moment there was a tremendous roar and the ship leaped under him. He grasped one of the wall holds and hung on as best he could. The cabin was filling with a steady throbbing, the raging of the jet turbines underneath them.

The ship leaped. Kramer closed his eyes and held his breath. They were moving out into space, gaining speed each moment.

“Well, what do you think?” Winter said nervously. “Is it time yet?”

“A little longer,” Kramer said. He was sitting on the floor of the cabin, down by the control wiring. He had removed the metal covering-plate, exposing the complicated maze of relay wiring. He was studying it, comparing it to the wiring diagrams.

“What’s the matter?” Gross said.

“These changes. I can’t figure out what they’re for. The only pattern I can make out is that for some reason —”

“Let me look,” the Pilot said. He squatted down beside Kramer. “You were saying?”

“See this lead here? Originally it was switch controlled. It closed and opened automatically, according to temperature change. Now it’s wired so that the central control system operates it. The same with the others. A lot of this was still mechanical, worked by pressure, temperature stress. Now it’s under the central master.”

“The brain?” Gross said. “You mean it’s been altered so that the brain manipulates it?”

Kramer nodded. “Maybe Professor Thomas felt that no mechanical relays could be trusted. Maybe he thought that things would be happening too fast. But some of these could close in a split second. The brake rockets could go on as quickly as —”

“Hey,” Winter said from the control seat. “We’re getting near the moon stations. What’ll I do?”

They looked out the port. The corroded surface of the moon gleamed up at them, a corrupt and sickening sight. They were moving swiftly toward it.

“I’ll take it,” the Pilot said. He eased Winter out of the way and strapped himself in place. The ship began to move away from the moon as he manipulated the controls. Down below them they could see the observation stations dotting the surface, and the tiny squares that were the openings of the underground factories and hangars. A red blinker winked up at them and the Pilot’s fingers moved on the board in answer.

“We’re past the moon,” the Pilot said, after a time. The moon had fallen behind them; the ship was heading into outer space. “Well, we can go ahead with it.”

Kramer did not answer.

“Mr. Kramer, we can go ahead any time.”

Kramer started. “Sorry. I was thinking. All right, thanks.” He frowned, deep in thought.

“What is it?” Gross asked.

“The wiring changes. Did you understand the reason for them when you gave the okay to the workmen?”

Gross flushed. “You know I know nothing about technical material. I’m in Security.”

“Then you should have consulted me.”

“What does it matter?” Gross grinned wryly. “We’re going to have to start putting our faith in the old man sooner or later.”

The Pilot stepped back from the board. His face was pale and set. “Well, it’s done,” he said. “That’s it.”

“What’s done?” Kramer said.

“We’re on automatic. The brain. I turned the board over to it — to him, I mean. The Old Man.” The Pilot lit a cigarette and puffed nervously. “Let’s keep our fingers crossed.”

The ship was coasting evenly, in the hands of its invisible pilot. Far down inside the ship, carefully armored and protected, a soft human brain lay in a tank of liquid, a thousand minute electric charges playing over its surface. As the charges rose they were picked up and amplified, fed into relay systems, advanced, carried on through the entire ship —

Gross wiped his forehead nervously. “So *he* is running it, now. I hope he knows what he’s doing.”

Kramer nodded enigmatically. “I think he does.”

“What do you mean?”

“Nothing.” Kramer walked to the port. “I see we’re still moving in a straight line.” He picked up the microphone. “We can instruct the brain orally, through this.” He blew against the microphone experimentally.

“Go on,” Winter said.

“Bring the ship around half-right,” Kramer said. “Decrease speed.”

They waited. Time passed. Gross looked at Kramer. “No change. Nothing.”

“Wait.”

Slowly the ship was beginning to turn. The turbines missed, reducing their steady beat. The ship was taking up its new course, adjusting itself. Nearby some space debris rushed past, incinerating in the blasts of the turbine jets.

“So far so good,” Gross said.

They began to breath more easily. The invisible pilot had taken control smoothly, calmly. The ship was in good hands. Kramer spoke a few more words into the microphone, and they swung again. Now they were moving back the way they had come, toward the moon.

“Let’s see what he does when we enter the moon’s pull,” Kramer said. “He was a good mathematician, the old man. He could handle any kind of problem.”

The ship veered, turning away from the moon. The great eaten-away globe fell behind them.

Gross breathed a sigh of relief. “That’s that.”

“One more thing.” Kramer picked up the microphone. “Return to the moon and land the ship at the first space field,” he said into it.

“Good Lord,” Winter murmured. “Why are you —”

“Be quiet.” Kramer stood, listening. The turbines gasped and roared as the ship swung full around, gaining speed. They were moving back, back toward the moon again. The ship dipped down, heading toward the great globe.

“We’re going a little fast,” the Pilot said. “I don’t see how he can put down at this velocity.”

The port filled up, as the globe swelled rapidly. The Pilot hurried toward the board, reaching for the controls. All at once the ship jerked. The nose lifted and the ship shot out into space, away from the moon, turning at an oblique angle. The men were thrown to the floor by the sudden change in course. They got to their feet again, speechless, staring at each other.

The Pilot gazed down at the board. “It wasn’t me! I didn’t touch a thing. I didn’t even get to it.”

The ship was gaining speed each moment. Kramer hesitated. “Maybe you better switch it back to manual.”

The Pilot closed the switch. He took hold of the steering controls and moved them experimentally. “Nothing.” He turned around. “Nothing. It doesn’t respond.”

No one spoke.

“You can see what has happened,” Kramer said calmly. “The old man won’t let go of it, now that he has it. I was afraid of this when I saw the wiring changes. Everything in this ship is centrally controlled, even the cooling system, the hatches, the garbage release. We’re helpless.”

“Nonsense.” Gross strode to the board. He took hold of the wheel and turned it. The ship continued on its course, moving away from the moon, leaving it behind.

“Release!” Kramer said into the microphone. “Let go of the controls! We’ll take it back. Release.”

“No good,” the Pilot said. “Nothing.” He spun the useless wheel. “It’s dead, completely dead.”

“And we’re still heading out,” Winter said, grinning foolishly. “We’ll be going through the first-line defense belt in a few minutes. If they don’t shoot us down —”

“We better radio back.” The Pilot clicked the radio to *send.* “I’ll contact the main bases, one of the observation stations.”

“Better get the defense belt, at the speed we’re going. We’ll be into it in a minute.”

“And after that,” Kramer said, “we’ll be in outer space. He’s moving us toward outspace velocity. Is this ship equipped with baths?”

“Baths?” Gross said.

“The sleep tanks. For space-drive. We may need them if we go much faster.”

“But good God, where are we going?” Gross said. “Where — where’s he taking us?”

The Pilot obtained contact. “This is Dwight, on ship,” he said. “We’re entering the defense zone at high velocity. Don’t fire on us.”

“Turn back,” the impersonal voice came through the speaker. “You’re not allowed in the defense zone.”

“We can’t. We’ve lost control.”

“Lost control?”

“This is an experimental ship.”

Gross took the radio. “This is Commander Gross, Security. We’re being carried into outer space. There’s nothing we can do. Is there any way that we can be removed from this ship?”

A hesitation. “We have some fast pursuit ships that could pick you up if you wanted to jump. The chances are good that they’d find you. Do you have space flares?”

“We do,” the Pilot said. “Let’s try it.”

“Abandon ship?” Kramer said. “If we leave now we’ll never see it again.”

“What else can we do? We’re gaining speed all the time. Do you propose that we stay here?”

“No.” Kramer shook his head. “Damn it, there ought to be a better solution.”

“Could you contact *him?”* Winter asked. “The Old Man? Try to reason with him?”

“It’s worth a chance,” Gross said. “Try it.”

“All right.” Kramer took the microphone. He paused a moment. “Listen! Can you hear me? This is Phil Kramer. Can you hear me, Professor? Can you hear me? I want you to release the controls.”

There was silence.

“This is Kramer, Professor. Can you hear me? Do you remember who I am? Do you understand who this is?”

Above the control panel the wall speaker made a sound, a sputtering static. They looked up.

“Can you hear me, Professor? This is Philip Kramer. I want you to give the ship back to us. If you can hear me, release the controls! Let go, Professor. Let go!”

Static. A rushing sound, like the wind. They gazed at each other. There was silence for a moment.

“It’s a waste of time,” Gross said.

“No — listen!”

The sputter came again. Then, mixed with the sputter, almost lost in it, a voice came, toneless, without inflection, a mechanical, lifeless voice from the metal speaker in the wall, above their heads.

“… Is it you, Philip? I can’t make you out. Darkness … Who’s there? With you…”

“It’s me, Kramer.” His fingers tightened against the microphone handle. “You must release the controls, Professor. We have to get back to Terra. You must.”

Silence. Then the faint, faltering voice came again, a little stronger than before. “Kramer. Everything so strange. I was right, though. Consciousness result of thinking. Necessary result. Cogito ergo sum. Retain conceptual ability. Can you hear me?”

“Yes, Professor —”

“I altered the wiring. Control. I was fairly certain … I wonder if I can do it. Try…”

Suddenly the air-conditioning snapped into operation. It snapped abruptly off again. Down the corridor a door slammed. Something thudded. The men stood listening. Sounds came from all sides of them, switches shutting, opening. The lights blinked off; they were in darkness. The lights came back on, and at the same time the heating coils dimmed and faded.

“Good God!” Winter said.

Water poured down on them, the emergency fire-fighting system. There was a screaming rush of air. One of the escape hatches had slid back, and the air was roaring frantically out into space.

The hatch banged closed. The ship subsided into silence. The heating coils glowed into life. As suddenly as it had begun the weird exhibition ceased.

“I can do — everything,” the dry, toneless voice came from the wall speaker. “It is all controlled. Kramer, I wish to talk to you. I’ve been — been thinking. I haven’t seen you in many years. A lot to discuss. You’ve changed, boy. We have much to discuss. Your wife —”

The Pilot grabbed Kramer’s arm. “There’s a ship standing off our bow. Look.”

They ran to the port. A slender pale craft was moving along with them, keeping pace with them. It was signal blinking.

“A Terran pursuit ship,” the Pilot said. “Let’s jump. They’ll pick us up. Suits —”

He ran to a supply cupboard and turned the handle. The door opened and he pulled the suits out onto the floor.

“Hurry,” Gross said. A panic seized them. They dressed frantically, pulling the heavy garments over them. Winter staggered to the escape hatch and stood by it, waiting for the others. They joined him, one by one.

“Let’s go!” Gross said. “Open the hatch.”

Winter tugged at the hatch. “Help me.”

They grabbed hold, tugging together. Nothing happened. The hatch refused to budge.

“Get a crowbar,” the Pilot said.

“Hasn’t anyone got a blaster?” Gross looked frantically around. “Damn it, blast it open!”

“Pull,” Kramer grated. “Pull together.”

“Are you at the hatch?” The toneless voice came, drifting and eddying through the corridors of the ship. They looked up, staring around them. “I sense something nearby, outside. A ship? You are leaving, all of you? Kramer, you are leaving, too? Very unfortunate. I had hoped we could talk. Perhaps at some other time you might be induced to remain.”

“Open the hatch!” Kramer said, staring up at the impersonal walls of the ship. “For God’s sake, open it!”

There was silence, an endless pause. Then, very slowly, the hatch slid back. The air screamed out, rushing past them into space.

One by one they leaped, one after the other, propelled away by the repulsive material of the suits. A few minutes later they were being hauled aboard the pursuit ship. As the last one of them was lifted through the port, their own ship pointed itself suddenly upward and shot off at tremendous speed. It disappeared.

Kramer removed his helmet, gasping. Two sailors held onto him and began to wrap him in blankets. Gross sipped a mug of coffee, shivering.

“It’s gone,” Kramer murmured.

“I’ll have an alarm sent out,” Gross said.

“What’s happened to your ship?” a sailor asked curiously. “It sure took off in a hurry. Who’s on it?”

“We’ll have to have it destroyed,” Gross went on, his face grim. “It’s got to be destroyed. There’s no telling what it — what *he* has in mind.” Gross sat down weakly on a metal bench. “What a close call for us. We were so damn trusting.”

“What could he be planning,” Kramer said, half to himself. “It doesn’t make sense. I don’t get it.”

As the ship sped back toward the moon base they sat around the table in the dining room, sipping hot coffee and thinking, not saying very much.

“Look here,” Gross said at last. “What kind of man was Professor Thomas? What do you remember about him?”

Kramer put his coffee mug down. “It was ten years ago. I don’t remember much. It’s vague.”

He let his mind run back over the years. He and Dolores had been at Hunt College together, in physics and the life sciences. The College was small and set back away from the momentum of modern life. He had gone there because it was his home town, and his father had gone there before him.

Professor Thomas had been at the College a long time, as long as anyone could remember. He was a strange old man, keeping to himself most of the time. There were many things that he disapproved of, but he seldom said what they were.

“Do you recall anything that might help us?” Gross asked. “Anything that would give us a clue as to what he might have in mind?”

Kramer nodded slowly. “I remember one thing…”

One day he and the Professor had been sitting together in the school chapel, talking leisurely.

“Well, you’ll be out of school, soon,” the Professor had said. “What are you going to do?”

“Do? Work at one of the Government Research Projects, I suppose.”

“And eventually? What’s your ultimate goal?”

Kramer had smiled. “The question is unscientific. It presupposes such things as ultimate ends.”

“Suppose instead along these lines, then: What if there were no war and no Government Research Projects? What would you do, then?”

“I don’t know. But how can I imagine a hypothetical situation like that? There’s been war as long as I can remember. We’re geared for war. I don’t know what I’d do. I suppose I’d adjust, get used to it.”

The Professor had stared at him. “Oh, you do think you’d get accustomed to it, eh? Well, I’m glad of that. And you think you could find something to do?”

Gross listened intently. “What do you infer from this, Kramer?”

“Not much. Except that he was against war.”

“We’re all against war,” Gross pointed out.

“True. But he was withdrawn, set apart. He lived very simply, cooking his own meals. His wife died many years ago. He was born in Europe, in Italy. He changed his name when he came to the United States. He used to read Dante and Milton. He even had a Bible.”

“Very anachronistic, don’t you think?”

“Yes, he lived quite a lot in the past. He found an old phonograph and records and he listened to the old music. You saw his house, how old-fashioned it was.”

“Did he have a file?” Winter asked Gross.

“With Security? No, none at all. As far as we could tell he never engaged in political work, never joined anything or even seemed to have strong political convictions.”

“No,” Kramer agreed. “About all he ever did was walk through the hills. He liked nature.”

“Nature can be of great use to a scientist,” Gross said. “There wouldn’t be any science without it.”

“Kramer, what do you think his plan is, taking control of the ship and disappearing?” Winter said.

“Maybe the transfer made him insane,” the Pilot said. “Maybe there’s no plan, nothing rational at all.”

“But he had the ship rewired, and he had made sure that he would retain consciousness and memory before he even agreed to the operation. He must have had something planned from the start. But what?”

“Perhaps he just wanted to stay alive longer,” Kramer said. “He was old and about to die. Or —”

“Or what?”

“Nothing.” Kramer stood up. “I think as soon as we get to the moon base I’ll make a vidcall to earth. I want to talk to somebody about this.”

“Who’s that?” Gross asked.

“Dolores. Maybe she remembers something.”

“That’s a good idea,” Gross said.

“Where are you calling from?” Dolores asked, when he succeeded in reaching her.

“From a moon base.”

“All kinds of rumors are running around. Why didn’t the ship come back? What happened?”

“I’m afraid he ran off with it.”

“He?”

“The Old Man. Professor Thomas.” Kramer explained what had happened.

Dolores listened intently. “How strange. And you think he planned it all in advance, from the start?”

“I’m certain. He asked for the plans of construction and the theoretical diagrams at once.”

“But why? What for?”

“I don’t know. Look, Dolores. What do you remember about him? Is there anything that might give a clue to all this?”

“Like what?”

“I don’t know. That’s the trouble.”

On the vidscreen Dolores knitted her brow. “I remember he raised chickens in his back yard and once he had a goat.” She smiled. “Do you remember the day the goat got loose and wandered down the main street of town? Nobody could figure out where it came from.”

“Anything else?”

“No.” He watched her struggling, trying to remember. “He wanted to have a farm, sometime, I know.”

“All right. Thanks.” Kramer touched the switch. “When I get back to Terra maybe I’ll stop and see you.”

“Let me know how it works out.”

He cut the line and the picture dimmed and faded. He walked slowly back to where Gross and some officers of the Military were sitting at a chart table, talking.

“Any luck?” Gross said, looking up.

“No. All she remembers is that he kept a goat.”

“Come over and look at this detail chart.” Gross motioned him around to his side. “Watch!”

Kramer saw the record tabs moving furiously, the little white dots racing back and forth.

“What’s happening?” he asked.

“A squadron outside the defense zone has finally managed to contact the ship. They’re maneuvering now, for position. Watch.”

The white counters were forming a barrel formation around a black dot that was moving steadily across the board, away from the central position. As they watched, the white dots constructed around it.

“They’re ready to open fire,” a technician at the board said. “Commander, what shall we tell them to do?”

Gross hesitated. “I hate to be the one who makes the decision. When it comes right down to it —”

“It’s not just a ship,” Kramer said. “It’s a man, a living person. A human being is up there, moving through space. I wish we knew what —”

“But the order has to be given. We can’t take any chances. Suppose he went over to them, to the yuks.”

Kramer’s jaw dropped. “My God, he wouldn’t do that.”

“Are you sure? Do you know what he’ll do?”

“He wouldn’t do that.”

Gross turned to the technician. “Tell them to go ahead.”

“I’m sorry, sir, but now the ship has gotten away. Look down at the board.”

Gross stared down, Kramer over his shoulder. The black dot had slipped through the white dots and had moved off at an abrupt angle. The white dots were broken up, dispersing in confusion.

“He’s an unusual strategist,” one of the officers said. He traced the line. “It’s an ancient maneuver, an old Prussian device, but it worked.”

The white dots were turning back. “Too many yuk ships out that far,” Gross said. “Well, that’s what you get when you don’t act quickly.” He looked up coldly at Kramer. “We should have done it when we had him. Look at him go!” He jabbed a finger at the rapidly moving black dot. The dot came to the edge of the board and stopped. It had reached the limit of the charted area. “See?”

Now what? Kramer thought, watching. So the Old Man had escaped the cruisers and gotten away. He was alert, all right; there was nothing wrong with his mind. Or with ability to control his new body.

Body — The ship was a new body for him. He had traded in the old dying body, withered and frail, for this hulking frame of metal and plastic, turbines and rocket jets. He was strong, now. Strong and big. The new body was more powerful than a thousand human bodies. But how long would it last him? The average life of a cruiser was only ten years. With careful handling he might get twenty out of it, before some essential part failed and there was no way to replace it.

And then, what then? What would he do, when something failed and there was no one to fix it for him? That would be the end. Someplace, far out in the cold darkness of space, the ship would slow down, silent and lifeless, to exhaust its last heat into the eternal timelessness of outer space. Or perhaps it would crash on some barren asteroid, burst into a million fragments.

It was only a question of time.

“Your wife didn’t remember anything?” Gross said.

“I told you. Only that he kept a goat, once.”

“A hell of a lot of help that is.”

Kramer shrugged. “It’s not my fault.”

“I wonder if we’ll ever see him again.” Gross stared down at the indicator dot, still hanging at the edge of the board. “I wonder if he’ll ever move back this way.”

“I wonder, too,” Kramer said.

That night Kramer lay in bed, tossing from side to side, unable to sleep. The moon gravity, even artificially increased, was unfamiliar to him and it made him uncomfortable. A thousand thoughts wandered loose in his head as he lay, fully awake.

What did it all mean? What was the Professor's plan? Maybe they would never know. Maybe the ship was gone for good: the Old Man had left forever, shooting into outer space. They might never find out why he had done it, what purpose — if any — had been in his mind.

Kramer sat up in bed. He turned on the light and lit a cigarette. His quarters were small, a metal-lined bunk room, part of the moon station base.

The Old Man had wanted to talk to him. He had wanted to discuss things, hold a conversation, but in the hysteria and confusion all they had been able to think of was getting away. The ship was rushing off with them, carrying them into outer space. Kramer set his jaw. Could they be blamed for jumping? They had no idea where they were being taken, or why. They were helpless, caught in their own ship, and the pursuit ship standing by waiting to pick them up was their only chance. Another half hour and it would have been too late.

But what had the Old Man wanted to say? What had he intended to tell him, in those first confusing moments when the ship around them had come alive, each metal strut and wire suddenly animate, the body of a living creature, a vast metal organism?

It was weird, unnerving. He could not forget it, even now. He looked around the small room uneasily. What did it signify, the coming to life of metal and plastic? All at once they had found themselves inside a *living* creature, in its stomach, like Jonah inside the whale.

It had been alive, and it had talked to them, talked calmly and rationally, as it rushed them off, faster and faster into outer space. The wall speaker and circuit had become the vocal cords and mouth, the wiring the spinal cord and nerves, the hatches and relays and circuit breakers the muscles.

They had been helpless, completely helpless. The ship had, in a brief second, stolen their power away from them and left them defenseless, practically at its mercy. It was not right; it made him uneasy. All his life he had controlled machines, bent nature and the forces of nature to man and man's needs. The human race had slowly evolved until it was in a position to operate things, run them as it saw fit. Now all at once it had been plunged back down the ladder again, prostrate before a Power against which they were children.

Kramer got out of bed. He put on his bathrobe and began to search for a cigarette. While he was searching, the vidscreen rang.

He snapped the vidphone on. "Yes?"

The face of the immediate monitor appeared. "A call from Terra, Mr. Kramer. An emergency call."

"Emergency call? For me? Put it through." Kramer came awake, brushing his hair back out of his eyes. Alarm plucked at him.

From the speaker a strange voice came. "Philip Kramer? Is this Kramer?"

"Yes. Go on."

"This is General Hospital. New York City, Terra. Mr. Kramer, your wife is here. She has been critically injured in an accident. Your name was given to us to call. Is it possible for you to —"

"How badly?" Kramer gripped the vidphone stand. "Is it serious?"

"Yes, it's serious, Mr. Kramer. Are you able to come here? The quicker you can come the better."

“Yes.” Kramer nodded. “I’ll come. Thanks.”

The screen died as the connection was broken. Kramer waited a moment. Then he tapped the button. The screen relit again. “Yes, sir,” the monitor said.

“Can I get a ship to Terra at once? It’s an emergency. My wife —”

“There’s no ship leaving the moon for eight hours. You’ll have to wait until the next period.”

“Isn’t there anything I can do?”

“We can broadcast a general request to all ships passing through this area. Sometimes cruisers pass by here returning to Terra for repairs.”

“Will you broadcast that for me? I’ll come down to the field.”

“Yes, sir. But there may be no ship in the area for a while. It’s a gamble.” The screen died.

Kramer dressed quickly. He put on his coat and hurried out the lift. A moment later he was running across the general receiving lobby, past the rows of vacant desks and conference tables. At the door the sentries stepped aside and he went outside, onto the great concrete steps.

The face of the moon was in shadow. Below him the field stretched out in total darkness, a black void, endless, without form. He made his way carefully down the steps and along the ramp along the side of the field, to the control tower. A faint row of red lights showed him the way.

Two soldiers challenged him at the foot of the tower, standing in the shadows, their guns ready.

“Kramer?”

“Yes.” A light was flashed in his face.

“Your call has been sent out already.”

“Any luck?” Kramer asked.

“There’s a cruiser nearby that has made contact with us. It has an injured jet and is moving slowly back toward Terra, away from the line.”

“Good.” Kramer nodded, a flood of relief rushing through him. He lit a cigarette and gave one to each of the soldiers. The soldiers lit up.

“Sir,” one of them asked, “is it true about the experimental ship?”

“What do you mean?”

“It came to life and ran off?’

“No, not exactly,” Kramer said. “It had a new type of control system instead of the Johnson units. It wasn’t properly tested.”

“But sir, one of the cruisers that was there got up close to it, and a buddy of mine says this ship acted funny. He never saw anything like it. It was like when he was fishing once on Terra, in Washington State, fishing for bass. The fish were smart, going this way and that —”

“Here’s your cruiser,” the other soldier said. “Look!”

An enormous vague shape was settling slowly down onto the field. They could make nothing out but its row of tiny green blinkers. Kramer stared at the shape.

“Better hurry, sir,” the soldiers said. “They don’t stick around here very long.”

“Thanks.” Kramer loped across the field, toward the black shape that rose above him, extended across the width of the field. The ramp was down from the side of the cruiser and he caught hold of it. The ramp rose, and a moment later Kramer was inside the hold of the ship. The hatch slid shut behind him.

As he made his way up the stairs to the main deck the turbines roared up from the moon, out into space.

Kramer opened the door to the main deck. He stopped suddenly, staring around him in surprise. There was nobody in sight. The ship was deserted.

“Good God,” he said. Realization swept over him, numbing him. He sat down on a bench, his head swimming. “Good God.”

The ship roared out into space leaving the moon and Terra farther behind each moment.

And there was nothing he could do.

“So it was you who put the call through,” he said at last. “It was you who called me on the vidphone, not any hospital on Terra. It was all part of the plan.” He looked up and around him. “And Dolores is really —”

“Your wife is fine,” the wall speaker above him said tonelessly. “It was a fraud. I’m sorry to trick you that way, Philip, but it was all I could think of. Another day and you would have been back on Terra. I don’t want to remain in this area any longer than necessary. They have been so certain of finding me out in deep space that I have been able to stay here without too much danger. But even the purloined letter was found eventually.”

Kramer smoked his cigarette nervously. “What are you going to do? Where are we going?’

“First, I want to talk to you. I have many things to discuss. I was very disappointed when you left me, along with the others. I had hoped that you would remain.” The dry voice chuckled. “Remember how we used to talk in the old days, you and I? That was a long time ago.”

The ship was gaining speed. It plunged through space at tremendous speed, rushing through the last of the defense zone and out beyond. A rush of nausea made Kramer bend over for a moment.

When he straightened up the voice from the wall went on. “I’m sorry to step it up so quickly, but we are still in danger. Another few moments and we’ll be free.”

“How about yuk ships? Aren’t they out here?’

“I’ve already slipped away from several of them. They’re quite curious about me.”

“Curious?”

“They sense that I’m different, more like their own organic mines. They don’t like it. I believe they will begin to withdraw from this area, soon. Apparently they don’t want to get involved with me. They’re an odd race, Philip. I would have liked to study them closely, try to learn something about them. I’m of the opinion that they use no inert material. All their equipment and instruments are alive, in some form or other. They don’t construct or build at all. The idea of *making* is foreign to them. They utilize existing forms. Even their ships —”

“Where are we going?” Kramer said. “I want to know where you are taking me.”

“Frankly, I’m not certain.”

“You’re not certain?”

“I haven’t worked some details out. There are a few vague spots in my program, still. But I think that in a short while I’ll have them ironed out.”

“What is your program?” Kramer said.

“It’s really very simple. But don’t you want to come into the control room and sit? The seats are much more comfortable than that metal bench.”

Kramer went into the control room and sat down at the control board. Looking at the useless apparatus made him feel strange.

“What’s the matter?” the speaker above the board rasped.

Kramer gestured helplessly. “I’m powerless. I can’t do anything. And I don’t like it. Do you blame me?”

“No. No, I don’t blame you. But you’ll get your control back, soon. Don’t worry. This is only a temporary expedient, taking you off this way. It was something I didn’t contemplate. I forgot that orders would be given out to shoot me on sight.”

“It was Gross’s idea.”

“I don’t doubt that. My conception, my plan, came to me as soon as you began to describe your project, that day at my house. I saw at once that you were wrong; you people have no understanding of the mind at all. I realized that the transfer of a human brain from an organic body to a complex artificial spaceship would not involve the loss of the intellectualization faculty of the mind. When a man thinks, he *is*.

“When I realized that, I saw the possibility of an age-old dream becoming real. I was quite elderly when I first met you, Philip. Even then my life-span had come pretty much to its end. I could look ahead to nothing but death, and with it the extinction of all my ideas. I had made no mark on the world, none at all. My students, one by one, passed from me into the world, to take up jobs in the great Research Project, the search for better and bigger weapons of war.

“The world has been fighting for a long time, first with itself, then with the Martians, then with these beings from Proxima Centauri, whom we know nothing about. The human society has evolved war as a cultural institution, like the science of astronomy, or mathematics. War is a part of our lives, a career, a respected vocation. Bright, alert young men and women move into it, putting their shoulders to the wheel as they did in the time of Nebuchadnezzar. It has always been so.

“But is it innate in mankind? I don’t think so. No social custom is innate. There were many human groups that did not go to war; the Eskimos never grasped the idea at all, and the American Indians never took to it well.

“But these dissenters were wiped out, and a cultural pattern was established that became the standard for the whole planet. Now it has become ingrained in us.

“But if someplace along the line some other way of settling problems had arisen and taken hold, something different than the massing of men and to —”

“What’s your plan?” Kramer said. “I know the theory. It was part of one of your lectures.”

“Yes, buried in a lecture on plant selection, as I recall. When you came to me with this proposition I realized that perhaps my conception could be brought to life, after all. If my theory were right that war is only a habit, not an instinct, a society built up apart from Terra with a minimum of cultural

roots might develop differently. If it failed to absorb our outlook, if it could start out on another foot, it might not arrive at the same point to which we have come: a dead end, with nothing but greater and greater wars in sight, until nothing is left but ruin and destruction everywhere.

"Of course, there would have to be a Watcher to guide the experiment, at first. A crisis would undoubtedly come very quickly, probably in the second generation. Cain would arise almost at once.

"You see, Kramer, I estimate that if I remain at rest most of the time, on some small planet or moon, I may be able to keep functioning for almost a hundred years. That would be time enough, sufficient to see the direction of the new colony. After that — Well, after that it would be up to the colony itself.

"Which is just as well, of course. Man must take control eventually, on his own. One hundred years, and after that they will have control of their destiny. Perhaps I am wrong, perhaps war is more than a habit. Perhaps it is a law of the universe, that things can only survive as groups by group violence.

"But I'm going ahead and taking the chance that it is only a habit, that I'm right, that war is something we're so accustomed to that we don't realize it is a very unnatural thing. Now as to the place! I'm still a little vague about that. We must find the place, still.

"That's what we're doing now. You and I are going to inspect a few systems off the beaten path, planets where the trading prospects are low enough to keep Terran ships away. I know of one planet that might be a good place. It was reported by the Fairchild expedition in their original manuscript. We may look into that, for a start."

The ship was silent.

Kramer sat for a time, staring down at the metal floor under him. The floor throbbed dully with the motion of the turbines. At last he looked up.

“You might be right. Maybe our outlook is only a habit.” Kramer got to his feet. “But I wonder if something has occurred to you?”

“What is that?”

“If it’s such a deeply ingrained habit, going back thousands of years, how are you going to get your colonists to make the break, leave Terra and Terran customs? How about *this* generation, the first ones, the people who found the colony? I think you’re right that the next generation would be free of all this, if there were an —” He grinned. “— An Old Man Above to teach them something else instead.”

Kramer looked up at the wall speaker. “How are you going to get the people to leave Terra and come with you, if by your own theory, this generation can’t be saved, it all has to start with the next?”

The wall speaker was silent. Then it made a sound, the faint dry chuckle.

“I’m surprised at you, Philip. Settlers can be found. We won’t need many, just a few.” The speaker chuckled again. “I’ll acquaint you with my solution.”

At the far end of the corridor a door slid open. There was sound, a hesitant sound. Kramer turned.

“Dolores!”

Dolores Kramer stood uncertainly, looking into the control room. She blinked in amazement. “Phil! What are you doing here? What’s going on?”

They stared at each other.

“What’s happening?” Dolores said. “I received a vidcall that you had been hurt in a lunar explosion —”

The wall speaker rasped into life. “You see, Philip, that problem is already solved. We don’t need so many people; even a single couple might do.”

Kramer nodded slowly. “I see,” he murmured thickly. “Just one couple. One man and woman.”

“They might make it all right, if there were someone to watch and see that things went as they should. There will be quite a few things I can help you with, Philip. Quite a few. We’ll get along very well, I think.”

Kramer grinned wryly. “You could even help us name the animals,” he said. “I understand that’s the first step.”

“I’ll be glad to,” the toneless, impersonal voice said. “As I recall, my part will be to bring them to you, one by one. Then you can do the actual naming.”

“I don’t understand,” Dolores faltered. “What does he mean, Phil? Naming animals. What kind of animals? Where are we going?”

Kramer walked slowly over to the port and stood staring silently out, his arms folded. Beyond the ship myriad fragments of light gleamed, countless coals glowing in the dark void. Stars, suns, systems. Endless, without number. A universe of worlds. An infinity of planets, waiting for them, gleaming and winking from the darkness.

He turned back, away from the port. “Where are we going?” He smiled at his wife, standing nervous and frightened, her large eyes full of alarm. “I don’t know where we are going,” he said. “But somehow that doesn’t seem important right now… I’m beginning to see the Professor’s point, it’s the result that counts.”

And for the first time in many months he put his arm around Dolores. At first she stiffened, the fright and nervousness still in her eyes. But then suddenly she relaxed against him and there were tears wetting her cheeks.

“Phil… do you really think we can start over again — you and I?”

He kissed her tenderly, then passionately.

And the spaceship shot swiftly through the endless, trackless eternity of the void…

Piper in the Woods

“Well, Corporal Westerburg,” Doctor Henry Harris said gently, “just why do you think you’re a plant?”

As he spoke, Harris glanced down again at the card on his desk. It was from the Base Commander himself, made out in Cox’s heavy scrawl: *Doc, this is the lad I told you about. Talk to him and try to find out how he got this delusion. He’s from the new Garrison, the new check station on Asteroid Y-3, and we don’t want anything to go wrong there. Especially a silly damn thing like this!*

Harris pushed the card aside and stared back up at the youth across the desk from him. The young man seemed ill at ease and appeared to be avoiding answering the question Harris had put to him. Harris frowned. Westerburg was a good looking chap, actually handsome in his Patrol uniform, a shock of blond hair over one eye. He was tall, almost six feet, a fine healthy lad, just two years out of Training, according to the card. Born in Detroit. Had measles when he was nine. Interested in jet engines, tennis, and girls. Twenty-six years old.

“Well, Corporal Westerburg,” Doctor Harris said again. “Why do you think you’re a plant?”

The Corporal looked up shyly. He cleared his throat. “Sir, I *am* a plant, I don’t just think so. I’ve been a plant for several days now.”

“I see.” The Doctor nodded. “You mean that you weren’t always a plant?”

“No sir. I just became a plant recently.”

“And what were you before you became a plant?”

“Well, sir, I was just like the rest of you.”

There was silence. Doctor Harris took up his pen and scratched a few lines, but nothing of importance came. A plant? And such a healthy-looking lad! Harris removed his steel-rimmed glasses and polished them with his handkerchief. He put them on again and leaned back in his chair. “Care for a cigarette, Corporal?”

“No, sir.”

The Doctor lit one for himself, resting his arm on the edge of the chair. “Corporal, you must realize that there are very few men who become plants, especially on such short notice. I have to admit you are the first person who has ever told me such a thing.”

“Yes, sir, I realize it’s quite rare.”

“You can understand why I’m interested, then. When you say you’re a plant, you mean you’re not capable of mobility? Or do you mean you’re a vegetable, as opposed to an animal? Or just what?”

The Corporal looked away. “I can’t tell you any more,” he murmured. “I’m sorry, sir.”

“Well, would you mind telling me *how* you became a plant?”

Corporal Westerburg hesitated. He stared down at the floor, then out the window at the spaceport, then at a fly on the desk. At last he stood up, getting slowly to his feet. “I can’t even tell you that, sir,” he said.

“You can’t? Why not?”

“Because — because I promised not to.”

The room was silent. Doctor Harris rose, too, and they both stood facing each other. Harris frowned, rubbing his jaw. “Corporal, just *who* did you promise?”

“I can’t even tell you that, sir. I’m sorry.”

The Doctor considered this. At last he went to the door and opened it. “All right, Corporal. You may go now. And thanks for your time.”

“I’m sorry I’m not more helpful.” The Corporal went slowly out and Harris closed the door after him. Then he went across his office to the vidphone. He rang Commander Cox’s letter. A moment later the beefy good-natured face of the Base Commander appeared.

“Cox, this is Harris. I talked to him, all right. All I could get is the statement that he’s a plant. What else is there? What kind of behavior pattern?”

“Well,” Cox said, “the first thing they noticed was that he wouldn’t do any work. The Garrison Chief reported that this Westerburg would wander off outside the Garrison and just sit, all day long. Just sit.”

“In the sun?”

“Yes. Just sit in the sun. Then at nightfall he would come back in. When they asked why he wasn’t working in the jet repair building he told them he had to be out in the sun. Then he said —” Cox hesitated.

“Yes? Said what?”

“He said that work was unnatural. That it was a waste of time. That the only worthwhile thing was to sit and contemplate — outside.”

“What then?”

“Then they asked him how he got that idea, and then he revealed to them that he had become a plant.”

“I’m going to have to talk to him again, I can see,” Harris said. “And he’s applied for a permanent discharge from the Patrol? What reason did he give?”

“The same, that he’s a plant now, and has no more interest in being a Patrolman. All he wants to do is sit in the sun. It’s the damnedest thing I ever heard.”

“All right. I think I’ll visit him in his quarters.” Harris looked at his watch. “I’ll go over after dinner.”

“Good luck,” Cox said gloomily. “But who ever heard of a man turning into a plant? We told him it wasn’t possible, but he just smiled at us.”

“I’ll let you know how I make out,” Harris said.

Harris walked slowly down the hall. It was after six; the evening meal was over. A dim concept was coming into his mind, but it was much too soon to be sure. He increased his pace, turning right at the end of the hall. Two nurses passed, hurrying by. Westerburg was quartered with a buddy, a man who had been injured in a jet blast and who was now almost recovered. Harris came to the dorm wing and stopped, checking the numbers on the doors.

“Can I help you, sir?” the robot attendant said, gliding up.

“I’m looking for Corporal Westerburg’s room.”

“Three doors to the right.”

Harris went on. Asteroid Y-3 had only recently been garrisoned and staffed. It had become the primary checkpoint to halt and examine ships

entering the system from outer space. The Garrison made sure that no dangerous bacteria, fungus, or what-not arrived to infect the system. A nice asteroid it was, warm, well-watered, with trees and lakes and lots of sunshine. And the most modern Garrison in the nine planets. He shook his head, coming to the third door. He stopped, raising his hand and knocking.

"Who's there?" sounded through the door.

"I want to see Corporal Westerburg."

The door opened. A bovine youth with horn-rimmed glasses looked out, a book in his hand. "Who are you?"

"Doctor Harris."

"I'm sorry, sir. Corporal Westerburg is asleep."

"Would he mind if I woke him up? I want very much to talk to him." Harris peered inside. He could see a neat room, with a desk, a rug and lamp, and two bunks. On one of the bunks was Westerburg, lying face up, his arms folded across his chest, his eyes tightly closed.

"Sir," the bovine youth said, "I'm afraid I can't wake him up for you, much as I'd like to."

"You can't? Why not?"

"Sir, Corporal Westerburg won't wake up, not after the sun sets. He just won't. He can't be awakened."

"Cataleptic? Really?"

"But in the morning, as soon as the sun comes up, he leaps out of bed and goes outside. Stays the whole day."

“I see,” the Doctor said. “Well, thanks anyhow.” He went back out into the hall and the door shut after him. “There’s more to this than I realized,” he murmured. He went on back the way he had come.

It was a warm sunny day. The sky was almost free of clouds and a gentle wind moved through the cedars along the bank of the stream. There was a path leading from the hospital building down the slope to the stream. At the stream a small bridge led over to the other side, and a few patients were standing on the bridge, wrapped in their bathrobes, looking aimlessly down at the water.

It took Harris several minutes to find Westerburg. The youth was not with the other patients, near or around the bridge. He had gone farther down, past the cedar trees and out onto a strip of bright meadow, where poppies and grass grew everywhere. He was sitting on the stream bank, on a flat gray stone, leaning back and staring up, his mouth open a little. He did not notice the Doctor until Harris was almost beside him.

“Hello,” Harris said softly.

Westerburg opened his eyes, looking up. He smiled and got slowly to his feet, a graceful, flowing motion that was rather surprising for a man of his size. “Hello, Doctor. What brings you out here?”

“Nothing. Thought I’d get some sun.”

“Here, you can share my rock,” Westerburg moved over and Harris sat down gingerly, being careful not to catch his trousers on the sharp edges of the rock. He lit a cigarette and gazed silently down at the water. Beside him, Westerburg had resumed his strange position, leaning back, resting on his hands, staring up with his eyes shut tight.

“Nice day,” the Doctor said.

“Yes.”

“Do you come here every day?”

“You like it better out here than inside.”

“I can’t stay inside,” Westerburg said.

“You can’t? How do you mean, ‘can’t’?”

“You would die without *air,* wouldn’t you?” the Corporal said.

“And you’d die without sunlight?”

Westerburg nodded.

“Corporal, may I ask you something? Do you plan to do this the rest of your life, sit out in the sun on a flat rock? Nothing else?”

Westerburg nodded.

“How about your job? You went to school for years to become a Patrolman. You wanted to enter the Patrol very badly. You were given a fine rating and a first-class position. How do you feel, giving all that up? You know, it won’t be easy to get back in again. Do you realize that?”

“I realize it.”

“And you’re really going to give it all up?”

“That’s right.”

Harris was silent for a while. At last he put his cigarette out and turned toward the youth. “All right, let’s say you give up your job and sit in the sun. Well, what happens, then? Someone else has to do the job instead of

you. Isn’t that true? The job has to be done, *your* job has to be done. And if you don’t do it someone else has to.”

“I suppose so.”

“Westerburg, suppose everyone felt the way you do? Suppose everyone wanted to sit in the sun all day? What would happen? No one would check ships coming from outer space. Bacteria and toxic crystals would enter the system and cause mass death and suffering. Isn’t that right?”

“If everyone felt the way I do they wouldn’t be going into outer space.”

“But they have to. They have to trade, they have to get minerals and products and new plants.”

“Why?”

“To keep society going.”

“Why?”

“Well —” Harris gestured. “People couldn’t live without society.”

Westerburg said nothing to that. Harris watched him, but the youth did not answer.

“Isn’t that right?” Harris said.

“Perhaps. It’s a peculiar business, Doctor. You know, I struggled for years to get through Training. I had to work and pay my own way. Washed dishes, worked in kitchens. Studied at night, learned, crammed, worked on and on. And you know what I think, now?”

“What?”

“I wish I’d become a plant earlier.”

Doctor Harris stood up. “Westerburg, when you come inside, will you stop off at my office? I want to give you a few tests, if you don’t mind.”

“The shock box?” Westerburg smiled. “I knew that would be coming around. Sure, I don’t mind.”

Nettled, Harris left the rock, walking back up the bank a short distance. “About three, Corporal?”

The Corporal nodded.

Harris made his way up the hill, to the path, toward the hospital building. The whole thing was beginning to become more clear to him. A boy who had struggled all his life. Financial insecurity. Idealized goal, getting a Patrol assignment. Finally reached it, found the load too great. And on Asteroid Y-3 there was too much vegetation to look at all day. Primitive identification and projection on the flora of the asteroid. Concept of security involved in immobility and permanence. Unchanging forest.

He entered the building. A robot orderly stopped him almost at once. “Sir, Commander Cox wants you urgently, on the vidphone.”

“Thanks.” Harris strode to the office. He dialed Cox’s letter and the Commander’s face came presently into focus. “Cox? This is Harris. I’ve been out talking to the boy. I’m beginning to to get this lined up, now. I can see the pattern, too much load too long. Finally gets what he wants and the idealization shatters under the —”

“Harris!” Cox barked. “Shut up and listen. I just got a report from Y-3. They’re sending an express rocket here. It’s on the way.”

“An express rocket?”

“Five more cases like Westerburg. All say they’re plants! The Garrison Chief is worried as hell. Says we *must* find out what it is or the Garrison will fall apart, right away. Do you get me, Harris? Find out what it is!”

“Yes, sir,” Harris murmured. “Yes, sir.”

By the end of the week there were twenty cases, and all, of course, were from Asteroid Y-3.

Commander Cox and Harris stood together at the top of the hill, looking gloomily down at the stream below. Sixteen men and four women sat in the sun along the bank, none of them moving, none speaking. An hour had gone by since Cox and Harris appeared, and in all that time the twenty people below had not stirred.

“I don’t get it,” Cox said, shaking his head. “I just absolutely don’t get it. Harris, is this the beginning of the end? Is everything going to start cracking around us? It gives me a hell of a strange feeling to see those people down there basking away in the sun, just sitting and basking.”

“Who’s that man there with the red hair?”

“That’s Ulrich Deutsch. He was Second in Command at the Garrison. Now look at him! Sits and dozes with his mouth open and his eyes shut. A week ago that man was climbing, going right up to the top. When the Garrison Chief retires he was supposed to take over. Maybe another year, at the most. All his life he’s been climbing to get up there.”

“And now he sits in the sun,” Harris finished.

“That woman. The brunette, with the short hair. Career woman. Head of the entire office staff of the Garrison. And the man beside her. Janitor. And that cute little gal there, with the bosom. Secretary, just out of school. All

kinds. And I got a note this morning, three more coming in sometime today."

Harris nodded. "The strange thing is — they really *want* to sit down there. They're completely rational; they could do something else, but they just don't care to."

"Well?" Cox said. "What are you going to do? Have you found anything? We're counting on you. Let's hear it."

"I couldn't get anything out of them directly," Harris said, "but I've had some interesting results with the shock box. Let's go inside and I'll show you."

"Fine," Cox turned and started toward the hospital. "Show me anything you've got. This is serious. Now I know how Tiberius felt when Christianity showed up in high places."

Harris snapped off the light. The room was pitch black. "I'll run this first reel for you. The subject is one of the best biologists stationed at the Garrison. Robert Bradshaw. He came in yesterday. I got a good run from the shock box because Bradshaw's mind is so highly differentiated. There's a lot of repressed material of a non-rational nature, more than usual."

He pressed a switch. The projector whirred, and on the far wall a three-dimensional image appeared in color, so real that it might have been the man himself. Robert Bradshaw was a man of fifty, heavyset, with iron-gray hair and a square jaw. He sat in the chair calmly, his hands resting on the arms, oblivious to the electrodes attached to his neck and wrist. "There I go," Harris said. "Watch."

His film-image appeared, approaching Bradshaw. "Now, Mr. Bradshaw," his image said, "this won't hurt you at all, and it'll help us a lot." The image rotated the controls on the shock box, Bradshaw stiffened, and his jaw set, but otherwise he gave no sign. The image of Harris regarded him for a time and then stepped away from the controls.

“Can you hear me, Mr. Bradshaw?” the image asked.

“Yes.”

“What is your name?”

“Robert C. Bradshaw.”

“What is your position?”

“Chief Biologist at the check station on Y-3.”

“Are you there now?”

“No, I’m back on Terra. In a hospital.”

“Why?”

“Because I admitted to the Garrison Chief that I had become a plant.”

“Is that true? That you are a plant.”

“Yes, in a non-biological sense. I retain the physiology of a human being, of course.”

“What do you mean, then, that you’re a plant?”

“The reference is to attitudinal response, to Weltanschauung.”

“Go on.”

“It is possible for a warm-blooded animal, an upper primate, to adopt the psychology of a plant, to some extent.”

“Yes?”

“I refer to this.”

“And the others? They refer to this also?”

“Yes.”

“How did this occur, your adopting this attitude?

Bradshaw’s image hesitated, the lips twisting. “See?” Harris said to Cox. “Strong conflict. He wouldn’t have gone on, if he had been fully conscious.”

“Yes?”

“I was taught to become a plant.”

The image of Harris showed surprise and interest. “What do you mean, you were *taught* to become a plant?”

“They realized my problems and taught me to become a plant. Now I’m free from them, the problems.”

“Who? Who taught you?”

“The Pipers.”

“Who? The Pipers? Who are the Pipers?”

There was no answer.

“Mr. Bradshaw, who are the Pipers?”

After a long, agonized pause, the heavy lips parted. “They live in the woods…”

Harris snapped off the projector, and the lights came on. He and Cox blinked. “That was all I could get,” Harris said. “But I was lucky to get that. He wasn’t supposed to tell, not at all. That was the thing they all promised not to do, tell who taught them to become plants. The Pipers who live in the woods on Asteroid Y-3.”

“You got this story from all twenty?”

“No.” Harris grimaced. “Most of them put up too much fight. I couldn’t even get *this* much from them.”

Cox reflected. “The Pipers. Well? What do you propose to do? Just wait around until you can get the full story? Is that your program?”

“No.” Harris said. “Not at all. I’m going to Y-3 and find out who the Pipers are, myself.”

The small patrol ship made its landing with care and precision, its jets choking into final silence. The hatch slid back and Doctor Henry Harris found himself staring out at a field, a brown, sun-baked landing field. At the end of the field was a tall signal tower. Around the field on all sides were long gray buildings, the Garrison check station itself. Not far off a huge Venusian cruiser was parked, a vast green hulk, like an enormous lime. The technicians from the station were swarming all over it, checking and examining each inch of it for lethal lifeforms and poisons that might have attached themselves to the hull.

“All out, sir,” the pilot said.

Harris nodded. He took hold of his two suitcases and stepped carefully down. The ground was hot underfoot, and he blinked in the bright sunlight. Jupiter was in the sky, and the vast planet reflected considerable sunlight down onto the asteroid.

Harris started across the field, carrying his suitcase. A field attendant was already busy opening the storage compartment of the Patrol ship, extracting his trunk. The attendant lowered the trunk into a waiting dolly and came after him, manipulating the little truck with bored skill.

As Harris came to the entrance of the signal tower the gate slid back and a man came forward, an older man, large and robust, with white hair and a steady walk.

“How are you, Doctor?” he said, holding his hand out. “I’m Lawrence Watts, the Garrison Chief.”

They shook hands. Watts smiled down at Harris. He was a huge old man, still regal and straight in his dark blue uniform, with his gold epaulets sparkling on his shoulders.

“Have a good trip?” Watts asked. “Come on inside and I’ll have a drink fixed for you. It gets hot around here, with the Big Mirror up there.”

“Jupiter?” Harris followed him inside the building. The signal tower was cool and dark, a welcome relief. “Why is the gravity so near Terra’s? I expected to go flying off like a kangaroo. Is it artificial?”

“No. There’s a dense core of some kind to the asteroid, some kind of metallic deposit. That’s why we picked this asteroid out of all the others. It made the construction problem much simpler, and it also explains why the asteroid has natural air and water. Did you see the hills?”

“The hills?”

“When we get up higher in the tower we’ll be able to see over the buildings. There’s quite a natural park here, a regular little forest, complete with everything you’d want. Come in here, Harris. This is my office.” The old man strode at quite a clip, around the corner and into a large, well-furnished apartment. “Isn’t this pleasant? I intend to make my last year here as amiable as possible.” He frowned. “Off course, with Deutsch gone, I may be here forever. Oh, well.” He shrugged. “Sit down, Harris.”

“Thanks.” Harris took a chair, stretching his legs out. He watched Watts as he closed the door to the hall. “By the way, any more cases come up?”

“Two more today.” Watts was grim. “Makes almost thirty, in all. We have three hundred men in this station. At the rate it’s going —”

“Chief, you spoke about a forest on the asteroid. Do you allow the crew to go into the forest at will? Or do you restrict them to the buildings and grounds?”

Watts rubbed his jaw. “Well, it’s a difficult situation, Harris. I have to let the men leave the grounds sometimes. They can *see* the forest from the buildings, and as long as you can see a nice place to stretch out and relax that does it. Once every ten days they have a full period of rest. Then they go out and fool around.”

“And then it happens?”

“Yes, I suppose so. But as long as they can see the forest, they’ll want to go. I can’t help it.”

“I know. I’m not censuring you. Well, what’s your theory? What happens to them out there? What do they do?”

“What happens? Once they get out there and take it easy for a while they don’t want to come back and work. It’s boondoggling. Playing hookey. They don’t want to work, so off they go.”

“How about this business of their delusions?”

Watts laughed good-naturedly. “Listen, Harris. You know as well as I do that’s a lot of poppycock. They’re no more plants than you or I. They just don’t want to work, that’s all. When I was a cadet we had a few ways to make people work. I wish we could lay a few on their backs, like we used to.”

“You think this is simple goldbricking, then?”

“Don’t you think it is?”

“No,” Harris said. “They really believe they’re plants. I put them through the high-frequency shock treatment, the shock box. The whole nervous system is paralyzed, all inhibitions stopped cold. They tell the truth, then. And they said the same thing — and more.”

Watts paced back and forth, his hands clasped behind his back. “Harris, you’re a doctor, and I suppose you know what you’re talking about. But look at the situation here. We have a garrison, a good modern garrison. We’re probably the most modern outfit in the system. Every new device and gadget is here that science can produce. Harris, this garrison is one vast machine. The men are parts, and each has his job, the Maintenance Crew, the Biologists, the Office Crew, the Managerial Staff.

“Look what happens when one person steps away from his job. Everything else begins to creak. We can’t service the bugs if no one services the machines. We can’t order food to feed the crews if no one makes out reports, takes inventories. We can’t direct any kind of activity if the Second in Command decides to go out and sit in the sun all day.

“Thirty people, one tenth of the Garrison. But we can’t run without them. The Garrison is built that way. If you take the supports out the whole building falls. No one can leave. We’re all tied here and these people know it. They know they have no right to do that, run off on their own. No one

has that right anymore. We're all too tightly interwoven to suddenly start doing what we want. It's unfair to the rest, the majority."

Harris nodded. "Chief, can I ask you something?"

"What is it?"

"Are there any inhabitants on the asteroid? Any natives?"

"Natives?" Watts considered. "Yes, there's some kind of aborigines living out there." He waved vaguely toward the window.

"What are they like? Have you seen them?"

"Yes, I've seen them. At least, I saw them when we first came here. They hung around for a while, watching us, then after a time they disappeared."

"Did they die off? Diseases of some kind?"

"No. They just — just disappeared. Into their forest. They're still there, someplace."

"What kind of people are they?"

"Well, the story is that they're originally from Mars. They don't look much like Martians, though. They're dark, a kind of coppery color. Thin. Very agile, in their own way. They hunt and fish. No written language. We don't pay much attention to them."

"I see." Harris paused. "Chief, have you ever heard of anything called — The Pipers?"

"The Pipers?" Watts frowned. "No. Why?"

“The patients mentioned something called The Pipers. According to Bradshaw, the Pipers taught him to become a plant. He learned it from them, a kind of teaching.”

“The Pipers. What are they?”

“I don’t know,” Harris admitted. “I thought maybe you might know. My first assumption, of course, was that they’re the natives. But now I’m not so sure, after hearing your description of them.”

“The natives are primitive savages. They don’t have anything to teach anybody, especially a top-flight biologist.”

Harris hesitated. “Chief, I’d like to go into the woods and look around. Is that possible?”

“Certainly. I can arrange it for you. I’ll give you one of the men to show you around.”

“I’d rather go alone. Is there any danger?”

“No, none that I know of. Except —”

“Except the Pipers,” Harris finished. “I know. Well, there’s only one way to find them, and that’s it. I’ll have to take my chances.”

“If you walk in a straight line,” Chief Watts said, “you’ll find yourself back at the Garrison in about six hours. It’s a damn small asteroid. There’s a couple of streams and lakes, so don’t fall in.”

“How about snakes or poisonous insects?”

“Nothing like that reported. We did a lot of tramping around at first, but it’s grown back now, the way it was. We never encountered anything

dangerous."

"Thanks, Chief," Harris said. They shook hands. "I'll see you before nightfall."

"Good luck." The Chief and his two armed escorts turned and went back across the rise, down the other side toward the Garrison. Harris watched them go until they disappeared inside the building. Then he turned and started into the grove of trees.

The woods were very silent around him as he walked. Trees towered up on all sides of him, huge dark-green trees like eucalyptus. The ground underfoot was soft with endless leaves that had fallen and rotted into the soil. After awhile the grove of high trees fell behind and he found himself crossing a dry meadow, the grass and weeds burned brown in the sun. Insects buzzed around him, rising up from the dry weed-stalks. Something scuttled ahead, hurrying through the undergrowth. He caught sight of a gray ball with many legs, scampering furiously, its antennae weaving.

The meadow ended at the bottom of a hill. He was going up, now, going higher and higher. Ahead of him an endless expanse of green rose, acres of wild growth. He scrambled to the top finally, blowing and panting, catching his breath.

He went on. Now he was going down again, plunging into a deep gully. Tall ferns grew, as large as trees. He was entering a living jurassic forest, ferns that stretched out endlessly ahead of him. Down he went, walking carefully. The air began to turn cold around him. The floor of the gully was damp and silent; underfoot the ground was almost wet.

He came out on a level table. It was dark, with the ferns growing up on all sides, dense growths of ferns, silent and unmoving. He came upon a natural path, an old stream bed, rough and rocky, but easy to follow. The air was thick and oppressive. Beyond the ferns he could see the side of the next hill, a green field rising up.

Something gray was ahead. Rocks, piled-up boulders, scattered and stacked here and there. The stream led directly to them. Apparently this had been a pool of some kind, a stream emptying from it. He climbed the first of the boulders awkwardly, feeling his way up. At the top he paused, resting again.

As yet he had had no luck. So far he had not met any of the natives. It would be through them that he would find the mysterious Pipers that were stealing the men away, if such really existed. If he could find the natives, talk to them, perhaps he could find out something. But as yet he had been unsuccessful. He looked around. The woods were very silent. A slight breeze moved through the ferns rustling them, but that was all. Where were the natives? Probably they had a settlement of some sort, huts, a clearing. The asteroid was small, he should be able to find them by nightfall.

He started down the rocks. More rocks rose up ahead and he climbed them. Suddenly he stopped, listening. Far off, he could hear a sound, the sound of water. Was he approaching a pool of some kind? He went on again, trying to locate the sound. He scrambled down rocks and up rocks, and all around him there was silence, except for the splashing of distant water. Maybe a waterfall, water in motion. A stream. If he found the stream he might find the natives.

The rocks ended and the stream bed began again, but this time it was wet, the bottom muddy and overgrown with moss. He was on the right track; not too long ago this stream had flowed, probably during the rainy season. He went up on the side of the stream, pushing through the ferns and vines. A golden snake slid expertly out of his path. Something glinted ahead, something sparkling through the ferns. Water. A pool. He hurried, pushing the vines aside and stepping out, leaving them behind.

He was standing on the edge of a pool, a deep pool sunk in a hollow of gray rocks, surrounded by ferns and vines. The water was clear and bright, and in motion, flowing in a waterfall at the far end. It was beautiful, and he stood watching, marveling at it, the undisturbed quality of it. Untouched, it was. Just as it had always been, probably. As long as the asteroid existed.

Was he the first to see it? Perhaps. It was so hidden, so concealed by the ferns. It gave him a strange feeling, a feeling almost of ownership. He stepped down a little toward the water.

And it was then he noticed her.

The girl was sitting on the far edge of the pool, staring down into the water, resting her head on one drawn-up knee. She had been bathing; he could see that at once. Her coppery body was still wet and glistening with moisture, sparkling in the sun. She had not seen him. He stopped, holding his breath, watching her.

She was lovely, very lovely, with long dark hair that wound around her shoulders and arms. Her body was slim, very slender, with a supple grace to it that made him stare, accustomed as he was to various forms of anatomy. How silent she was! Silent and unmoving, staring down at the water. Time passed, strange, unchanging time, as he watched the girl. Time might even have ceased, with the girl sitting on the rock staring into the water, and the rows of great ferns behind her, as rigid as if they had been painted there.

All at once the girl looked up. Harris shifted, suddenly conscious of himself as an intruder. He stepped back. “I’m sorry,” he murmured. “I’m from the Garrison. I didn’t mean to come poking around.”

She nodded without speaking.

“You don’t mind?” Harris asked presently.

“No.”

So she spoke Terran! He moved a little toward her, around the side of the pool. “I hope you don’t mind my bothering you. I won’t be on the asteroid very long. This is my first day here. I just arrived from Terra.”

She smiled faintly.

“I’m a doctor. Henry Harris.” He looked down at her, at the slim coppery body gleaming in the sunlight, a faint sheen of moisture on her arms and thighs. “You might be interested in why I’m here.” He paused. “Maybe you can even help me.”

She looked up a little. “Oh?”

“Would you like to help me?”

She smiled. “Yes. Of course.”

“That’s good. Mind if I sit down?” He looked around and found himself a flat rock. He sat down slowly, facing her. “Cigarette?”

“No.”

“Well, I’ll have one.” He lit up, taking a deep breath. “You see, we have a problem at the Garrison. Something has been happening to some of the men, and it seems to be spreading. We have to find out what causes it or we won’t be able to run the Garrison.”

He waited for a moment. She nodded slightly. How silent she was! Silent and unmoving. Like the ferns.

“Well, I’ve been able to find out a few things from them, and one very interesting fact stands out. They keep saying that something called — called The Pipers are responsible for their condition. They say the Pipers taught them —” He stopped. A strange look had flitted across her dark, small face. “Do you know the Pipers?”

She nodded.

Acute satisfaction flooded over Harris. “You do? I was sure the natives would know.” He stood up again. “I was sure they would, if the Pipers really existed. Then they do exist, do they?”

“They exist.”

Harris frowned. “And they’re here, in the woods?”

“Yes.”

“I see.” He ground his cigarette out impatiently. “You don’t suppose there’s any chance you could take me to them, do you?”

“Take you?”

“Yes. I have this problem and I have to solve it. You see, the Base Commander on Terra has assigned this to me, this business about the Pipers. It has to be solved. And I’m the one assigned to the job. So it’s important to me to find them. Do you see? Do you understand?”

She nodded.

“Well, will you take me to them?”

The girl was silent. For a long time she sat, staring down into the water, resting her head against her knee. Harris began to become impatient. He fidgeted back and forth, resting first on one leg and then on the other.

“Well, will you?” he said again. “It’s important to the whole Garrison. What do you say?” He felt around in his pockets. “Maybe I could give you something. What do I have…” He brought out his lighter. “I could give you my lighter.”

The girl stood up, rising slowly, gracefully, without motion or effort.

Harris' mouth fell open. How supple she was, gliding to her feet in a single motion! He blinked. Without effort she had stood, seemingly without *change*. All at once she was standing instead of sitting, standing and looking calmly at him, her small face expressionless.

"Will you?" he said.

"Yes. Come along." She turned away, moving toward the row of ferns.

Harris followed quickly, stumbling across the rocks. "Fine," he said. "Thanks a lot. I'm very interested to meet these Pipers. Where are you taking me, to your village? How much time do we have before nightfall?"

The girl did not answer. She had entered the ferns already, and Harris quickened his pace to keep from losing her. How silently she glided!

"Wait," he called. "Wait for me."

The girl paused, waiting for him, slim and lovely, looking silently back.

He entered the ferns, hurrying after her.

"Well I'll be damned!" Commander Cox said. "It sure didn't take you long." He leaped down the steps two at a time. "Let me give you a hand."

Harris grinned, lugging his heavy suitcases. He set them down and breathed a sigh of relief. "It isn't worth it," he said. "I'm going to give up taking so much."

"Come on inside. Soldier, give him a hand." A Patrolman hurried over and took one of the suitcases. The three men went inside and down the corridor to Harris' quarters. Harris unlocked the door and the Patrolman deposited his suitcase inside.

“Thanks,” Harris said. He set the other down beside it. “It’s good be be back, even for a little while.”

“A little while?”

“I just came back to settle my affairs. I have to return to Y-3 tomorrow morning.”

“Then you didn’t solve the problem?”

“I solved it, but I haven’t *cured* it. I’m going back and get to work right away. There’s a lot to be done.”

“But you found out what it is?”

“Yes. It was just what the men said. The Pipers.”

“The Pipers do exist?”

“Yes.” Harris nodded. “They do exist.” He removed his coat and put it over the back of the chair. Then he went to the window and let it down. Warm spring air rushed into the room. He settled himself on the bed, leaning back.

“The Pipers exist, all right — in the minds of the Garrison crew! To the crew, the Pipers are real. The crew created them. It’s a mass hypnosis, a group projection, and all the men there have it, to some degree.”

“How did it start?”

“Those men on Y-3 were sent because they were skilled, highly-trained men with exceptional ability. All their lives they’ve been schooled by complex modern society, fast tempo and high integration between people. Constant pressure toward some goal, some job to be done.

“Those men are put down suddenly on an asteroid where there are natives living the most primitive of existence, completely vegetable lives. No concept of goal, no concept of purpose, and hence no ability to plan. The natives live the way the animals live, from day to day, sleeping, picking food from the trees. A kind of Garden-of-Eden existence, without struggle or conflict.”

“So? But —”

“Each of the Garrison crew sees the natives and *unconsciously* thinks of his own early life, when he was a child, when *he* had no worries, no responsibilities, before he joined modern society. A baby lying in the sun.

“But he can’t admit this to himself! He can’t admit that he might *want* to live like the natives, to lie and sleep all day. So he invents The Pipers, the idea of a mysterious group living in the woods who trap him, lead him into their kind of life. Then he can blame *them*, not himself. They ‘teach’ him to become a part of the woods.”

“What are you going to do? Have the woods burned?”

“No.” Harris shook his head. “That’s not the answer; the woods are harmless. The answer is psychotherapy for the men. That’s why I’m going right back, so I can begin work. They’ve got to be made to see that the Pipers are inside them, their own unconscious voices calling to them to give up their responsibilities. They’ve got to be made to realize that there are no Pipers, at least, not outside themselves. The woods are harmless and the natives have nothing to teach anyone. They’re primitive savages, without even a written language. We’re seeing a psychological projection by a whole Garrison of men who want to lay down their work and take it easy for a while.”

The room was silent.

“I see,” Cox said presently. “Well, it makes sense.” He got to his feet. “I hope you can do something with the men you get back.”

“I hope so, too,” Harris agreed. “And I think I can. After all, it’s just a question of increasing their self-awareness. When they have that the Pipers will vanish.”

Cox nodded. “Well, you go ahead with your unpacking, Doc. I’ll see you at dinner. And maybe before you leave, tomorrow.”

“Fine.”

Harris opened the door and the Commander went out into the hall. Harris closed the door after him and then went back across the room. He looked out the window for a moment, his hands in his pockets.

It was becoming evening, the air was turning cool. The sun was just setting as he watched, disappearing behind the buildings of the city surrounding the hospital. He watched it go down.

Then he went over to his two suitcases. He was tired, very tired from his trip. A great weariness was beginning to descend over him. There were so many things to do, so terribly many. How could he hope to do them all? Back to the asteroid. And then what?

He yawned, his eyes closing. How sleepy he was! He looked over at the bed. Then he sat down on the edge of it and took his shoes off. So much to do, the next day.

He put his shoes in the corner of the room. Then he bent over, unsnapping one of the suitcases. He opened the suitcase. From it he took a bulging gunny-sack. Carefully, he emptied the contents of the sack out on the floor. Dirt, rich soft dirt. Dirt he had collected during his last hours there, dirt he had carefully gathered up.

When the dirt was spread out on the floor he sat down in the middle of it. He stretched himself out, leaning back. When he was fully comfortable

he folded his hands across his chest and closed his eyes. So much work to do — But later on, of course. Tomorrow. How warm the dirt was…

He was sound asleep in a moment.

The Infinites

“I don’t like it,” Major Crispin Eller said. He stared through the port scope, frowning. “An asteroid like this with plenty of water, moderate temperature, an atmosphere similar to Terra’s oxygen-nitrogen mix —”

“And no life.” Harrison Blake, second in command, came up beside Eller. They both stared out. “No life, yet ideal conditions. Air, water, good temperature. Why?”

They looked at each other. Beyond the hull of the cruiser, the X-43y, the barren, level surface of the asteroid stretched away. The X-43y was a long way from home, halfway across the galaxy. Competition with the Mars-Venus-Jupiter Triumvirate had moved Terra to map and prospect every bit of rock in the galaxy, with the idea of claiming mining concessions later on. The X-43y had been out planting the blue and white flag for almost a year. The three-member crew had earned a rest, a vacation back on Terra and a chance to spend the pay they had accumulated. Tiny prospecting ships led a hazardous life, threading their way through the rubble-strewn periphery of the system, avoiding meteor swarms, clouds of hull-eating bacteria, space pirates, peanut-size empires on remote artificial planetoids —

“Look at it!” Eller said, jabbing angrily at the scope. “Perfect conditions for life. But nothing, just bare rock.”

“Maybe it’s an accident,” Blake said, shrugging.

“You know there’s no place where bacteria particles don’t drift. There must be some reason why this asteroid isn’t fertile. I sense something wrong.”

“Well? What do we do?” Blake grinned humorlessly. “You’re the captain. According to our instructions we’re supposed to land and map every asteroid we encounter over Class-D diameter. This is a Class-C. Are we going outside and map it or not?”

Eller hesitated. “I don’t like it. No one knows all the lethal factors floating out here in deep space. Maybe —”

“Could it be you’d like to go right on back to Terra?” Blake said. “Just think, no one would know we passed this last little bit of rock up. I wouldn’t tip them off, Eller.”

“That isn’t it! I’m concerned with our safety, and that’s all. You’re the one who’s been agitating to turn Terraside.” Eller studied the port scope. “If we only knew.”

“Let out the pigs and see what shows. After they’ve run around for a while we should know something.”

“I’m sorry I even landed.”

Blake’s face twisted in contempt. “You’re sure getting cautious, now that we’re almost ready to head home.”

Eller moodily watched the gray barren rock, the gently moving water. Water and rock, a few clouds, even temperature. A perfect place for life. But there was no life. The rock was clean, smooth. Absolutely sterile, without growth or cover of any kind. The spectroscope showed nothing, not even one-celled water life, not even the familiar brown lichen encountered on countless rocks strewn through the galaxy.

“All right, then,” Eller said. “Open one of the locks. I’ll have Silv let out the pigs.”

He picked up the com, dialing the laboratory. Down below them in the interior of the ship Silvia Simmons was working, surrounded by retorts and testing apparatus. Eller clicked the switch. “Silv?” he said.

Silvia’s features formed on the vidscreen. “Yes?”

“Let the hamsters outside the ship for a short run, about half an hour. With line and collars, of course. I’m worried about this asteroid. There may be some toxic poisons around or radiation pits. When the pigs come back give them a rigid test. Throw the book at them.”

“All right, Cris,” Silvia smiled. “Maybe we can get out and stretch our legs after a while.”

“Give me the results of the tests as soon as possible.” Eller broke the circuit. He turned to Blake. “I assume you’re satisfied. In a minute the pigs will be ready to go out.”

Blake smiled faintly. “I’ll be glad when we get back to Terra. One trip with you as captain is about all I can take.”

Eller nodded. “Strange, that thirteen years in the Service hasn’t taught you any more self-control. I guess you’ll never forgive them for not giving you your stripes.”

“Listen, Eller,” Blake said. “I’m ten years older than you. I was serving when you were just a kid. You’re still a pasty-faced squirt as far as I’m concerned. The next time —”

“CRIS!”

Eller turned quickly. The vidscreen was relit. On it, Silvia’s face showed, frantic with fear.

“Yes?” He gripped the com. “What is it?”

“Cris, I went to the cages. The hamsters — They’re cataleptic, stretched out, perfectly rigid. Every one of them is immobile. I’m afraid something —”

“Blake, get the ship up,” Eller said.

“What?” Blake murmured, confused. “Are we —”

“Get the ship up! Hurry!” Eller raced toward the control board. “We have to get out of here!”

Blake came to him. “Is something —” he began, but abruptly he stopped, choked off. His face glazed over, his jaw slack. Slowly he settled to the smooth metal floor, falling like a limp sack. Eller stared, dazed. At last he broke away and reached toward the controls. All at once a numbing fire seared his skull, bursting inside his head. A thousand shafts of light exploded behind his eyes, blinding him. He staggered, groping for the switches. As darkness plucked at him his fingers closed over the automatic lift.

As he fell he pulled hard. Then the numbing darkness settled over him completely. He did not feel the smashing impact of the floor as it came up at him.

Out into space the ship rose, automatic relays pumping frantically. But inside no one moved.

Eller opened his eyes. His head throbbed with a deep, aching beat. He struggled to his feet, holding onto the hull railing. Harrison Blake was coming to life also, groaning and trying to rise. His dark face had turned sickly yellow, his eyes were blood-shot, his lips foam-flecked. He stared at Cris Eller, rubbing his forehead shakily.

“Snap out of it,” Eller said, helping him up. Blake sat down in the control chair.

“Thanks.” He shook his head. “What-what happened?”

“I don’t know. I’m going to the lab and see if Silv is all right.”

“Want me to come?” Blake murmured.

“No. Sit still. Don’t strain your heart. Do you understand? Move as little as possible.”

Blake nodded. Eller walked unsteadily across the control room to the corridor. He entered the drop lift and descended. A moment later he stepped out into the lab.

Silvia was slumped forward at one of the work tables, stiff and unmoving.

“Silv!” Eller ran toward her and caught hold of her, shaking her. Her flesh was hard and cold. “Silv!”

She moved a little.

“Wake up!” Eller got a stimulant tube from the supply cabinet. He broke the tube, holding it by her face. Silvia moaned. He shook her again.

“Cris?” Silvia said faintly. “Is it you? What — what happened? Is everything all right?” She lifted her head, blinking uncertainly. “I was talking to you on the vidscreen. I came over to the table, then all of a sudden —”

“It’s all right.” Eller frowned, deep in thought, his hand on her shoulder. “What could it have been? Some kind of radiation blast from the asteroid?” He glanced at his wristwatch. “Good Lord!”

“What’s wrong?” Silvia sat up, brushing her hair back. “What is it, Cris?

“We’ve been unconscious two whole days,” Eller said slowly, staring at his watch. He put his hand to his chin. “Well, that explains this.” He rubbed

at the stubble.

“But we’re all right now, aren’t we?” Silvia pointed at the hamsters in their cages against the wall. “Look — they’re up and running around again.”

“Come on.” Eller took her hand. “We’re going up above and have a conference, the three of us. We’re going over every dial and meter reading in the ship. I want to know what happened.”

Blake scowled. “I have to agree. I was wrong. We never should have landed.”

“Apparently the radiation came from the center of the asteroid.” Eller traced a line on the chart. “This reading shows a wave building up quickly and then dying down. A sort of pulse wave from the asteroid’s core, rhythmic.”

“If we hadn’t got into space we might have been hit by a second wave,” Silvia said.

“The instruments picked up a subsequent wave about fourteen hours later. Apparently the asteroid has a mineral deposit that pulses regularly, throwing out radiation at fixed intervals. Notice how short the wave lengths are. Very close to cosmic ray patterns.”

“But different enough to penetrate our screen.”

“Right. It hit us full force.” Eller leaned back in his seat. “That explains why there was no life on the asteroid. Bacteria landing would be withered by the first wave. Nothing would have a chance to get started.”

“Cris?” Silvia said.

“Yes?”

“Cris, do you think the radiation might have done anything to us? Are we out of danger? Or—”

“I’m not certain. Look at this.” Eller passed her a graph of lined foil, traced in red. “Notice that although our vascular systems have fully recovered, our neural responses are still not quite the same. There’s been alteration there.”

“In what way?”

“I don’t know. I’m not a neurologist. I can see distinct differences from the original tracings, the characteristic test patterns we traced a month or two ago, but what it means I have no way to tell.”

“Do you think it’s serious?”

“Only time will tell. Our systems were jolted by an intense wave of unclassified radiation for a straight ten hours. What permanent effects it has left, I can’t say. I feel all right at this moment. How do you feel?”

“Fine,” Silvia said. She looked out through the port scope at the dark emptiness of deep space, at the endless fragments of light arranged in tiny unmoving specks. “Anyhow, we’re finally heading Terraside. I’ll be glad to get home. We should have them examine us right away.”

“At least our hearts survived without any obvious damage. No blood clots or cell destruction. That was what I was primarily worried about. Usually a dose of hard radiation of that general type will —”

“How soon will we reach the system?” Blake said.

“A week.”

Blake set his lips. “That’s a long time. I hope we’re still alive.”

“I’d advise against exercising too much,” Eller said. “We’ll take it easy the rest of the way and hope that whatever has been done to us can be undone back on Terra.”

“I guess we actually got off fairly easy.” Silvia said. She yawned. “Lord, I’m sleepy.” She got slowly to her feet, pushing her chair back. “I think I’ll turn in. Anyone object?”

“Go ahead,” Eller said. “Blake, how about some cards? I want to relax. Blackjack?”

“Sure,” Blake said. “Why not?” He slid a deck from his jacket pocket. “It’ll make the time pass. Cut for deal.”

“Fine.” Eller took the deck. He cut, showing a seven of clubs. Blake won the deck with a jack of hearts.

They played listlessly, neither of them much interested. Blake was sullen and uncommunicative, still angry because Eller had been proved so right. Eller himself was tired and uncomfortable. His head throbbed dully in spite of the opiates he had taken. He removed his helmet and rubbed his forehead.

“Play,” Blake murmured. Under them the jets rumbled, carrying them nearer and nearer Terra. In a week they would enter the system. They had not seen Terra in over a year. How would it look? Would it still be the same? The great green globe, with its vast oceans, all the tiny islands. Then down at New York Spaceport. San Francisco, for him. It would be nice, all right. The crowds of people, Terrans, good old frivolous, senseless Terrans, without a care in the world. Eller grinned up at Blake. His grin turned to a frown.

Blake’s head had drooped. His eyes were slowly closing. He was going to sleep.

“Wake up,” Eller said. “What’s the matter?”

Blake grunted, pulling himself up straight. He went on dealing the next hand. Again his head sank lower and lower.

“Sorry,” he murmured. He reached out to draw in his winnings. Eller fumbled in his pocket, getting out more credits. He looked up, starting to speak. But Blake had fallen completely asleep.

“I’ll be damned!” Eller got to his feet. “This is strange.” Blake’s chest rose and fell evenly. He snored a little, his heavy body relaxed. Eller turned down the light and walked toward the door. What was the matter with Blake? It was unlike him to pass out during a game of cards.

Eller went down the corridor toward his own quarters. He was tired and ready for sleep. He entered his washroom, unfastening his collar. He removed his jacket and turned on the hot water. It would be good to get into bed, to forget everything that had happened to them, the sudden exploding blast of radiation, the painful awakening, the gnawing fear. Eller began to wash his face. Lord, how his head buzzed. Mechanically, he splashed water on his arms.

It was not until he had almost finished washing that he noticed it. He stood for a long time, water running over his hands, staring silently down, unable to speak.

His fingernails were gone.

He looked up in the mirror, breathing quickly. Suddenly he grabbed at his hair. Handfuls of hair came out, great bunches of light brown hair. Hair and nails —

He shuddered, trying to calm himself. Hair and nails. Radiation. Of course: radiation did that, killed both the hair and the nails. He examined his hands.

The nails were completely gone all right. There was no trace of them. He turned his hands over and over, studying the fingers. The ends were smooth and tapered. He fought down rising panic, moving unsteadily away from the mirror.

A thought struck him. Was he the only one? What about Silvia!

He put his jacket on again. Without nails his fingers were strangely deft and agile. Could there be anything else? They had to be prepared. He looked into the mirror again.

And sickened.

His head - What was happening? He clasped his hands to his temples. *His head.* Something was wrong, terribly wrong. He stared, his eyes wide. He was almost completely hairless, now, his shoulders and jacket covered with brown hair that had fallen. His scalp gleamed, bald and pink, a shocking pink. But there was something more.

His head had expanded. It was swelling into a full sphere. And his ears were shriveling, his ears and his nose. His nostrils were becoming thin and transparent even as he watched. He was changing, altering, faster and faster.

He reached a shaking hand into his mouth. His teeth were loose in the gums. He pulled. Several teeth came out easily. What was happening? Was he dying? Was he the only one? What about the others?

Eller turned and hurried out of the room. His breath came painfully, harshly. His chest seemed constricted, his ribs choking the air out of him. His heart labored, beating fitfully. And his legs were weak. He stopped, catching hold of the door. He started into the lift. Suddenly there was a sound, a deep bull roar. Blake’s voice, raised in terror and agony.

“That answers that,” Eller thought grimly, as the lift rose around him. “At least I’m not the only one!”

Harrison Blake gaped at him in horror. Eller had to smile. Blake, hairless, his skull pink and glistening, was not a very impressive sight. His cranium, too, had enlarged, and his nails were gone. He was standing by the control table, staring first at Eller and then down at his own body. His uniform was too large for his dwindling body. It bagged around him in slack folds.

“Well?” Eller said. “We’ll be lucky if we get out of this. Space radiations can do strange things to a man’s body. It was a bad day for us when we landed on that —”

“Eller,” Blake whispered. “What’ll we do? We can’t live this way, not like this! Look at us.”

“I know.” Eller set his lips. He was having trouble speaking now that he was almost toothless. He felt suddenly like a baby. Toothless, without hair, a body growing more helpless each moment. Where would it end?

“We can’t go back like this,” Blake said. “We can’t go back to Terra, not looking this way. Good heavens, Eller! We’re freaks. Mutants. They’ll — they’ll lock us up like animals in cages. People will —”

“Shut up.” Eller crossed to him. “We’re lucky to be alive at all. Sit down.” He drew a chair out. “I think we better get off our legs.”

They both sat down. Blake took a deep, shuddering breath. He rubbed his smooth forehead, again and again.

“It’s not us I’m worried about,” Eller said, after a time. “It’s Silvia. She’ll suffer the most from this. I’m trying to decide whether we should go down at all. But if we don’t, she may —”

There was a buzz. The vidscreen came to life, showing the white-walled laboratory, the retorts and rows of testing equipment, lined up neatly against

the walls.

“Cris?” Silvia’s voice came, thin and edged with horror. She was not visible on the screen. Apparently she was standing off to one side.

“Yes.” Eller went to the screen. “How are you?”

“How am I?” A thrill of hysteria ran through the girl’s voice. “Cris, has it hit you, too? I’m afraid to look.” There was a pause. “It has, hasn’t it? I can see you — but don’t try to look at me. I don’t want you to see me again. It’s — it’s horrible. What are we going to do?”

“I don’t know. Blake says he won’t go back to Terra this way.”

“No! We can’t go back! We can’t!”

There was silence. “We’ll decide later,” Eller said finally. “We don’t have to settle it now. These changes in our systems are due to radiation, so they may be only temporary. They may go away, in time. Or surgery may help. Anyhow, let’s not worry about it now.”

“Not worry? No, of course I won’t worry. How could I worry about a little thing like this! Cris, don’t you understand? We’re monsters, hairless monsters. No hair, no teeth, no nails. Our heads —”

“I understand.” Eller set his jaw. “You stay down in the lab. Blake and I will discuss it with you on the vidscreen. You won’t have to show yourself to us.”

Silvia took a deep breath. “Anything you say. You’re still captain.”

Eller turned away from the screen. “Well, Blake, do you feel well enough to talk?”

The great-domed figure in the corner nodded, the immense hairless skull moving slightly. Blake's once great body had shrunk, caved in. The arms were pipe stems, the chest hollow and sickly. Restlessly, the soft fingers tapped against the table. Eller studied him.

"What is it?" Blake said.

"Nothing. I was just looking at you."

"You're not very pleasant looking, either."

"I realize that." Eller sat down across from him. His heart was pounding, his breath coming shallowly. "Poor Silv! It's worse for her than it is for us."

Blake nodded. "Poor Silv. Poor all of us. She's right, Eller. We're monsters." His fragile lips curled. "They'll destroy us back on Terra. Or lock us up. Maybe a quick death would be better. Monsters, freaks, hairless hydrocephalics."

"Not hydrocephalics," Eller said. "Your brain isn't impaired. That's one thing to be thankful for. We can still think. We still have our minds."

"In any case we know why there isn't life on the asteroid," Blake said ironically. "We're a success as a scouting party. We got the information. Radiation, lethal radiation, destructive to organic tissue. Produces mutation and alteration in cell growth as well as changes in the structure and function of the organs."

Eller studied him thoughtfully. "That's quite learned talk for you, Blake."

"It's an accurate description." Blake looked up. "Let's be realistic. We're monstrous cancers blasted by hard radiation. Let's face it. We're not

men, not human beings any longer. We're —"

"We're what?"

"I don't know." Blake lapsed into silence.

"It's strange," Eller said. He studied his fingers moodily. He experimented, moving his fingers about. Long, long and thin. He traced the surface of the table with them. The skin was sensitive. He could feel every indentation of the table, every line and mark.

"What are you doing?" Blake said.

"I'm curious." Eller held his fingers close to his eyes, studying them. His eyesight was dimming. Everything was vague and blurred. Across from him Blake was staring down. Blake's eyes had begun to recede, sinking slowly into the great hairless skull. It came to Eller all at once that they were losing their sight. They were going slowly blind. Panic seized him.

"Blake!" he said. "We're going blind. There's a progressive deterioration of our eyes, vision and muscles."

"I know," Blake said.

"But why? We're actually losing the eyes themselves! They're going away, drying up. Why?"

"Atrophied," Blake murmured.

"Perhaps." Eller brought out a log book from the table, and a writing beam. He traced a few notes on the foil. Sight diminishing, vision failing rapidly. But fingers much more sensitive. Skin response unusual. Compensation?

“What do you think of this?” he said. “We’re losing some functions, gaining others.”

“In our hands?” Blake studied his own hands. “The loss of the nails makes it possible to use the fingers in new ways.” He rubbed his fingers against the cloth of his uniform. “I can feel individual fibers which was impossible before.”

“Then the loss of nails was purposeful!”

“So?”

“We’ve been assuming this was all without purpose. Accidental burns, cell destruction, alteration. I wonder… ” Eller moved the writing beam slowly across the log sheet. Fingers: new organs of perception. Heightened touch, more tactile response. But vision dimming… .

“Cris!” Silvia’s voice came, sharp and frightened.

“What is it?” He turned toward the vidscreen.

“I’m losing my sight. I can’t see.”

“It’s all right. Don’t worry.”

“I’m — I’m afraid.”

Eller went over to the vidscreen. “Silv, I think we’re losing some senses and gaining others. Examine your fingers. Do you notice anything? Touch something.”

There was an agonizing pause. “I seem to be able to feel things much differently. Not the same as before.”

“That’s why our nails are gone.”

“But what does it mean?”

Eller touched his bulging cranium, exploring the smooth skin thoughtfully. Suddenly he clenched his fists, gasping. “Silv! Can you still operate the X-ray equipment? Are you mobile enough to cross the lab?”

“Yes, I suppose so.”

“Then I want an X-ray plate made. Make it right away. As soon as it’s ready i notify me.”

“An X-ray plate? Of what?”

“Of your own cranium. I want to see what changes our brains have undergone. Especially the cerebrum. I’m beginning to understand, I think.”

“What is it?”

“I’ll tell you when I see the plate.” A faint smile played across Eller’s thin lips. “If I’m right, then we’ve been completely mistaken about what’s happened to us!”

For a long time Eller stared at the X-ray plate framed in the vidscreen. Dimly he made out the lines of the skull, struggling to see with his fading eyesight. The plate trembled in Silvia’s hands.

“What do you see?” she whispered.

“I was right. Blake, look at this, if you can.”

Blake came slowly over, supporting himself with one of the chairs. “What i is it?” He peered at the plate, blinking. “I can’t see well enough.”

“The brain has changed enormously. Notice how much enlargement there is here.” Eller traced the frontal lobe outline. “Here, and here. There’s been growth, amazing growth. And greater convolution. Notice this odd bulge off the frontal lobe. A kind of projection. What do you suppose it might be?”

“I have no idea,” Blake said. “Isn’t that area mainly concerned with higher processes of thought?”

“The most developed cognitive faculties are located there. And that’s where the most growth has taken place.” Eller moved slowly away from the screen.

“What do you make of it?” Silvia’s voice came.

“I have a theory. It may be wrong, but this fits in perfectly. I thought of it almost at first, when I saw that my nails were gone.”

“What’s your theory?”

Eller sat down at the control table. “Better get off your feet, Blake. I don’t think our hearts are too strong. Our body mass is decreasing, so perhaps later on —”

“Your theory! What is it?” Blake came toward him, his thin bird-like chest rising and falling. He peered down intently at Eller. “What is it?”

“We’ve evolved,” Eller said. “The radiation from the asteroid speeded up cell growth, like cancer. But not without design. There’s purpose and direction to these changes, Blake. We’re changing rapidly, moving through centuries in a few seconds.”

Blake stared at him.

“It’s true,” Eller said. “I’m sure of it. The enlarged brain, diminished powers of sight, loss of hair, teeth. Increased dexterity and tactile sense. Our bodies have lost, for the most part. But our minds have benefited. We’re developing greater cognitive powers, greater conceptual capacity. Our minds are moving ahead into the future. Our minds are evolving.”

“Evolving!” Blake sat down slowly. “Can this be true?”

“I’m certain of it. We’ll take more X-rays, of course. I’m anxious to see changes in the internal organs, kidneys, stomach. I imagine we’ve lost portions of our —”

“Evolved! But that means that evolution is not the result of accidental external stresses. Competition and struggle. Natural selection, aimless, without direction. It implies that every organism carries the thread of its evolution within it. Then evolution is ideological, with a goal, not determined by chance.”

Eller nodded. “Our evolution seems to be more of an internal growth and change along distinct lines. Certainly not at random. It would be interesting to know what the directing force is.”

“This throws a new light on things,” Blake murmured. “Then we’re not monsters, after all. We’re not monsters. We’re — we’re men of the future.”

Eller glanced at him. There was a strange quality in Blake’s voice. “I suppose you might say that,” he admitted. “Of course, we’ll still be considered freaks on Terra.”

“But they’ll be wrong,” Blake said. “Yes, they’ll look at us and say we’re freaks. But we’re not freaks. In another few million years the rest of mankind will catch up to us. We’re moving ahead of our own time, Eller.”

Eller studied Blake’s great bulging head. He could only dimly make out its lines. Already, the well-lighted control room was turning almost dark.

Their sight was virtually gone. All he could make out was vague shadows, nothing more.

“Men of the future,” Blake said. “Not monsters, but men from tomorrow. Yes, this certainly throws a new light on things.” He laughed nervously. “A few minutes ago I was ashamed of my new appearance! But now —”

“But now what?”

“But now I’m not so sure.”

“What do you mean?”

Blake did not answer. He had got slowly to his feet, holding onto the table.

“Where are you going?” Eller said.

Blake crossed the control room painfully, feeling his way toward the door. “I must think this over. There are astonishing new elements to be considered. I agree, Eller. You’re quite right. We have evolved. Our cognitive faculties are greatly improved. There’s considerable deterioration in body functions, of course. But that’s to be expected. I think we’re actually the gainers, everything considered.” Blake touched his great skull cautiously. “Yes, I think that in the long run we may have gained. We will look back on this as a great day, Eller. A great day in our lives. I’m sure your theory is correct. As the process continues I can sense changes in my conceptual abilities. The Gestalt faculty has risen amazingly. I can intuit certain relationships that —”

“Stop!” Eller said. “Where are you going? Answer me. I’m still captain of this ship.”

“Going? I’m going to my quarters. I must rest. This body is highly inadequate. It may be necessary to devise mobile carts and perhaps even artificial organs as mechanical lungs and hearts. I’m certain the pulmonary and vascular systems are not going to stand up long. The life expectancy is no doubt greatly diminished. I’ll see you later, Major Eller. But perhaps I should not use the word *see.”* He smiled faintly. “We will not see much any more.” He raised his hands. “But *these* will take the place of vision.” He touched his skull. “And *this* will take the place of many, many things.”

He disappeared, closing the door behind him. Eller heard him going slowly, determinedly down the corridor, feeling his way along with careful, feeble steps.

Eller crossed to the vidscreen. “Silv! Can you hear me? Did you listen to our conversation?”

“Yes.”

“Then you know what has happened to us.”

“Yes, I know. Cris, I’m almost completely blind now. I can see virtually nothing.”

Eller grimaced, remembering Silvia’s keen, sparkling eyes. “I’m sorry, Silv. I wish this had never happened. I wish we were back the way we were. It’s not worth it.”

“Blake thinks it’s worth it.”

“I know. Listen, Silv. I want you to come here to the control room, if you can. I’m worried about Blake, and I want you here with me.”

“Worried? How?”

“He’s got something on his mind. He’s not going to his quarters merely to rest. Come here with me and we’ll decide what to do. A few minutes ago I was the one who said we should go back to Terra. But now I think I’m beginning I change my mind.”

“Why? Because of Blake? You don’t suppose Blake would —”

“I’ll discuss it with you when you get here. Make your way along with your hands. Blake did it, so probably you can. I think perhaps we won’t return to Terra after all. But I want to give you my reasons.”

“I’ll be there as soon as I can,” Silvia said. “But be patient. And Cris — Don’t look at me. I don’t want you to see me this way.”

“I won’t see you,” Eller said grimly. “By the time you get here I won’t be able to see much at all.”

Silvia sat down at the control table. She had put on one of the spacesuits from the lab locker so that her body was hidden by the plastic and metal suit. Eller waited until she had caught her breath.

“Go on,” Silvia said.

“The first thing we must do is collect all the weapons on the ship. When Blake comes back I’m going to announce that we are not returning to Terra. I think he will be angry, perhaps enough to start trouble. If I’m not mistaken, he very much wants to keep moving Terraside now, as he begins to understand the implications of our change.”

“And you don’t want to go back.”

“No.” Eller shook his head. “We must not go back to Terra. There’s danger, great danger. You can see what kind of danger already.”

“Blake is fascinated by the new possibilities,” Silvia said thoughtfully. “We’re ahead of other men, several millions of years, advancing each moment. Our brains, our powers of thought, are far in advance of other Terrans.”

“Blake will want to go back to Terra, not as an ordinary man, but as a man of the future. We may find ourselves in relation to other Terrans as geniuses among idiots. If the process of change keeps up, we may find them nothing more than higher primates, animals in comparison to us.”

They both were silent.

“If we go back to Terra we’ll find human beings nothing more than animals,” Eller went on. “Under the circumstances, what would be more natural than for us to help them? After all, we’re millions of years ahead of them. We could do a lot for them if they’d let us direct them, lead them, do their planning for them.”

“And if they resist we probably could find ways of gaining control of them,” Silvia said. “And everything, of course, would be for their own good. That goes without saying. You’re right, Cris. If we go back to Terra we’ll soon find ourselves contemptuous of mankind. We’ll want to lead them, show them how to live, whether they want us to or not. Yes, it’ll be a strong temptation.”

Eller got to his feet. He went over to the weapons locker and opened it. Carefully, he removed the heavy-duty Boris guns and brought them over to the table, one by one.

“The first thing is to destroy these. After that, you and I have to see to it that Blake is kept away from the control room. Even if we have to barricade ourselves in, it has to be done. I’ll reroute the ship. We’ll move away from the system, toward some remote region. It’s the only way.”

He opened the Boris guns and removed the firing controls. One by one he broke the controls, crunching them under foot.

There was a sound. Both turned, straining to see.

"Blake!" Eller said. "It must be you. I can't see you, but —"

"You're correct," Blake's voice came. "No, Eller, we're all of us blind, or almost blind. So you destroyed the Boris guns! I'm afraid that won't keep us from returning to Terra."

"Go back to your quarters," Eller said. "I'm the captain, and I'm giving you an order to —"

Blake laughed. "You're ordering me? You're almost blind, Eller, but I think you'll be able to see — this!"

Something rose up into the air around Blake, a soft pale cloud of blue. Eller gasped, cringing, as the cloud swirled around him. He seemed to be dissolving, breaking into countless fragments, rushed and carried away, drifting —

Blake withdrew the cloud into the tiny disc that he held. "If you'll remember," he said calmly, "I received the *first* bath of radiation. I'm a little ahead of you two, by only a short time, perhaps, but enough. In any case, the Boris guns would have been useless, compared to what I have. Remember, everything in this ship is a million years antiquated. What I hold —"

"Where did you get it, that disc?"

"I got it nowhere. I constructed it, as soon as I realized that you would turn the ship away from Terra. I found it easy to make. In a short time the two of you will also begin to realize our new powers. But right now, I'm afraid, you're just a bit behind."

Eller and Silvia struggled to breathe. Eller sank against the hull railing, exhausted, his heart laboring. He stared at the disc in Blake's hand.

"We'll continue moving toward Terra," Blake went on. "Neither of you is going to change the control settings. By the time we arrive at the New York Spaceport you both will have come to see things differently. When you've caught up with me you'll see things as I see them. We must go back, Eller. It's our duty to mankind."

"Our duty?"

There was a faint mocking quality in Blake's voice. "Of course it's our duty! Mankind needs us. It needs us very much. There's much we can do for Terra. You see, I was able to catch some of your thoughts. Not all of them, but enough to know what you were planning. You'll find that from now on we'll begin to lose speech as a method of communication. We'll soon begin to rely directly on —"

"If you can see into my mind then you can see why we mustn't return to Terra," Eller said.

"I can see what you're thinking but you're wrong. We must go back for their good." Blake laughed softly. "We can do a lot for them. Their science will change in our hands. They will change, altered by us. We'll remake Terra, make her strong. The Triumvirate will be helpless before the new Terra, the Terra that we will build. The three of us will transform the race, make it rise, burst across the entire galaxy. Mankind will be material for us to mold. The blue and white will be planted everywhere, on all the planets of the galaxy, not on mere bits of rock. We'll make Terra strong, Eller. Terra will rule everywhere."

"So that's what you have in mind," Eller said. "And if Terra doesn't want to go along with us? What then?"

"It is possible they won't understand," Blake admitted. "After all, we must begin to realize that we're millions of years ahead of them. They're a

long way behind us, and many times they may not understand the purpose of our orders. But you know that orders must be carried out, even if their meaning is not comprehended. You've commanded ships, you know that. For Terra's own good, and for —"

Eller leaped. But the fragile, brittle body betrayed him. He fell short, grasping frantically, blindly, for Blake. Blake cursed, stepping back.

"You fool! Don't you —"

The disc glinted, the blue cloud bursting into Eller's face. He staggered to one side, his hands up. Abruptly he fell, crashing to the metal floor. Silvia lumbered to her feet, coming toward Blake, slow and awkward in the heavy spacesuit. Blake turned toward her, the disc raised. A second cloud rose up. Silvia screamed. The cloud devoured her.

"Blake!" Eller struggled to his knees. The tottering figure that had been Silvia lurched and fell. Eller caught hold of Blake's arms. The two figures swayed back and forth. Blake trying to pull away. Suddenly Eller's strength gave out. He slipped back down, his head striking the metal floor. Nearby, Silvia lay, silent and inert.

"Get away from me," Blake snarled, waving the disc. "I can destroy you the way I did her. Do you understand?"

"You killed her," Eller screamed.

"It's your own fault. You see what you gained by fighting? Stay away from me! If you come near me I'll turn the cloud on you again. It'll be the end of you."

Eller did not move. He stared at the silent form.

“All right,” Blake’s voice came to him, as if from a great distance. “Now listen to me. We’re continuing toward Terra. You’ll guide the ship for me while I work down in the laboratory. I can follow your thoughts, so if you attempt to change course I’ll know at once. Forget about her! It still leaves two of us, enough to do what we must. We’ll be within the system in a few days. There’s much to accomplish, first.” Blake’s voice was calm, matter of fact. “Can you get up?”

Eller rose slowly, holding onto the hull railing.

“Good,” Blake said. “We must work everything out very carefully. We may have difficulties with the Terrans at first. We must be prepared for that. I think that in the time remaining I will be able to construct the necessary equipment that we will need. Later on, when your development catches up with my own, we will be able to work together to produce the things we need.”

Eller stared at him. “Do you think I’ll ever go along with you?” he said. His glance moved toward the figure on the floor, the silent, unmoving figure. “Do you think after that I could ever —”

“Come, come, Eller,” Blake said impatiently. “I’m surprised at you. You must begin to see things from a new position. There is too much involved to consider —”

“So this is how mankind will be treated! This is the way you’ll save them, by ways like this!”

“You’ll come around to a realistic attitude,” Blake said calmly. “You’ll see that as men of the future —”

“Do you really think I will?”

The two men faced each other.

Slowly a flicker of doubt passed over Blake's face. "You must, Eller! It's our duty to consider things in a new way. Of course you will." He frowned, raising the disc a little. "How can there be any doubt of that?"

Eller did not answer.

"Perhaps," Blake said thoughtfully, "you will hold a grudge against me. Perhaps your vision will be clouded by this incident. It is possible…" The disc moved. "In that case I must adjust myself as soon as possible to the realization that I will have to go on alone. If you won't join me to do the things that must be done then I will have to do them without you." His fingers tightened against the disc. "I will do it all alone, Eller, if you won't join me. Perhaps this is the best way. Sooner or later this moment might come, in any case. It is better for me to —"

Blake screamed.

From the wall a vast, transparent shape moved slowly, almost leisurely, out into the control room. Behind the shape came another, and then another, until at last there were five of them. The shapes pulsed faintly, glimmering with a vague, internal glow. All were identical, featureless.

In the center of the control room the shapes came to rest, hovering a little way up from the floor, soundlessly, pulsing gently, as if waiting.

Eller stared at them. Blake had lowered his disc and was standing, pale and tense, gaping in astonishment. Suddenly Eller realized something that made chill fear rush through him. He was not seeing the shapes at all. He was almost completely blind. He was sensing them in some new way, through some new mode of perception. He struggled to comprehend, his mind racing. Then, all at once, he understood. And he knew why they had no distinct shapes, no features.

They were pure energy.

Blake pulled himself together, coming to life. “What —” he stammered, waving the disc. “Who —”

A thought flashed, cutting Blake off. The thought seared through Eller’s mind, hard and sharp, a cold, impersonal thought, detached and remote.

“The girl. First.”

Two of the shapes moved toward Silvia’s inert form, lying silently beside Eller. They paused a slight distance above her, glowing and pulsing. Then part of the glimmering corona leaped out, hurtling toward the girl’s body, bathing her in a shimmering fire.

“That will suffice,” a second thought came, after a few moments. The corona retreated. “Now, the one with the weapon.”

A shape moved toward Blake. Blake retreated toward the door behind him. His withered body shook with fear.

“What are you?” he demanded, raising the disc. “Who are you? Where did you come from?”

The shape came on.

“Get away!” Blake cried. “Get back! If you don’t —”

He fired. The blue cloud entered the shape. The shape quivered for a moment, absorbing the cloud. Then it came on again. Blake’s jaw fell. He scrambled into the corridor, stumbling and falling. The shape hesitated at the door. Then it was joined by a second shape which moved up beside it.

A ball of light left the first shape, moving toward Blake. It enveloped him. The light winked out. There was nothing where Blake had stood. Nothing at all.

“That was unfortunate,” a thought came. “But necessary. Is the girl reviving?”

“Yes.”

“Good.”

“Who are you?” Eller asked. “What are you? Will Silv be all right? Is she alive?”

“The girl will recover.” The shapes moved toward Eller, surrounding him. “We should perhaps have intervened before she was injured but we preferred to wait until we were certain the one with the weapon was going to gain control.”

“Then you knew what was happening?”

“We saw it all.”

“Who are you? Where did you — where did you come from?”

“We were here,” the thought came.

“Here?”

“On the ship. We were here from the start. You see, *we* were the first to receive the radiation; Blake was wrong. So our transformation began even before his did. And in addition, we had much farther to go. Your race has little evolution ahead of it. A few more inches of cranium, a little less hair, perhaps. But not really so much. Our race, on the other hand, had just begun.”

“Your race? First to receive the radiation?” Eller stared around him in dawning realization. “Then you must be —”

“Yes,” the calm, inflexible thought came. “You are right. We are the hamsters from the laboratory. The pigs carried for your experiments and tests.” There was almost a note of humor in the thought. “However, we hold nothing against you, I assure you. In fact, we have very little interest in your race, one way or another. We owe you a slight debt for helping us along our path, bringing our destiny onto us in a few short minutes instead of another fifty million years.

“For that we are thankful. And I think we have already repaid you. The girl will be all right. Blake is gone. You will be allowed to continue on your way back to your own planet.”

“Back to Terra?” Eller faltered. “But —”

“There is one more thing that we will do before we go,” the calm thought came. “We have discussed the matter and we are in complete agreement on this. Eventually your race will achieve its rightful position through the natural course of time. There is no value in hurrying it prematurely. For the sake of your race and the sake of you two, we will do one last thing before we depart. You will understand.”

A swift ball of flame rose from the first shape. It hovered over Eller. It touched him and passed on to Silvia. “It is better,” the thought came. “There is no doubt.”

They watched silently, staring through the port scope. From the side of the ship the first ball of light moved, flashing out into the void.

“Look!” Silvia exclaimed.

The ball of light increased speed. It shot away from the ship, moving at incredible velocity. A second ball oozed through the hull of the ship, out into space behind the first.

After it came a third, a fourth, and finally a fifth. One by one the balls of light hurtled out into the void, out into deep space.

When they were gone Silvia turned to Eller, her eyes shining. “That’s that,” she said. “Where are they going?”

“No way to tell. A long way, probably. Maybe not anywhere in this galaxy. Some remote place.” Eller reached out suddenly, touching Silvia’s dark-brown hair. He grinned. “You know, your hair is really something to see. The most beautiful hair in the whole universe.”

Silvia laughed. “Any hair looks good to us, now.” She smiled up at him, her red lips warm. “Even yours, Cris.”

Eller gazed down at her a long time. “They were right,” he said at last.

“Right?”

“It *is* better.” Eller nodded, gazing down at the girl beside him, at her hair and dark eyes, the familiar lithe, supple form. “I agree — There is no doubt of it.”

The Preserving Machine

Doc Labyrinth leaned back in his lawn chair, closing his eyes gloomily. He pulled his blanket up around his knees.

"Well?" I said. I was standing by the barbecue pit, warming my hands. It was a clear cold day. The sunny Los Angeles sky was almost cloud-free. Beyond Labyrinth's modest house a gently undulating expanse of green stretched off until it reached the mountains — a small forest that gave the illusion of wilderness within the very limits of the city. "Well?" I said. "Then the Machine did work the way you expected?"

Labyrinth did not answer. I turned around. The old man was staring moodily ahead, watching an enormous dun-colored beetle that was slowly climbing the side of his blanket. The beetle rose methodically, its face blank with dignity. It passed over the top and disappeared down the far side. We were alone again.

Labyrinth sighed and looked up at me. "Oh, it worked well enough."

I looked after the beetle, but it was nowhere to be seen. A faint breeze eddied around me, chill and thin in the fading afternoon twilight. I moved nearer the barbecue pit.

"Tell me about it," I said.

Doctor Labyrinth, like most people who read a great deal and who have too much time on their hands, had become convinced that our civilization was going the way of Rome. He saw, I think, the same cracks forming that had sundered the ancient world, the world of Greece and Rome; and it was his conviction that presently our world, our society, would pass away as theirs did, and a period of darkness would follow.

Now Labyrinth, having thought this, began to brood over all the fine and lovely things that would be lost in the reshuffling of societies. He thought of the art, the literature, the manners, the music, everything that would be lost. And it seemed to him that of all these grand and noble things, music would probably be the most lost, the quickest forgotten.

Music is the most perishable of things, fragile and delicate, easily destroyed.

Labyrinth worried about this, because he loved music, because he hated the idea that some day there would be no more Brahms and Mozart, no more gentle chamber music that he could dreamily associate with powdered wigs and resined bows, with long, slender candles, melting away in the gloom.

What a dry and unfortunate world it would be, without music! How dusty and unbearable.

This is how he came to think of the Preserving Machine. One evening as he sat in his living room in his deep chair, the gramophone on low, a vision came to him. He perceived in his mind a strange sight, the last score of a Schubert trio, the last copy, dog-eared, well-thumbed, lying on the floor of some gutted place, probably a museum.

A bomber moved overhead. Bombs fell, bursting the museum to fragments, bringing the walls down in a roar of rubble and plaster. In the debris the last score disappeared, lost in the rubbish, to rot and mold.

And then, in Doc Labyrinth’s vision, he saw the score come burrowing out, like some buried mole. Quick like a mole, in fact, with claws and sharp teeth and a furious energy.

If music had that faculty, the ordinary, everyday instinct of survival which every worm and mole has, how different it would be! If music could be transformed into living creatures, animals with claws and teeth, then

music might survive. If only a Machine could be built, a Machine to process musical scores into living forms.

But Doc Labyrinth was no mechanic. He made a few tentative sketches and sent them hopefully around to the research laboratories. Most of them were much too busy with war contracts, of course. But at last he found the people he wanted. A small midwestern university was delighted with his plans, and they were happy to start work on the Machine at once.

Weeks passed. At last Labyrinth received a postcard from the university. The Machine was coming along fine; in fact, it was almost finished. They had given it a trial run, feeding a couple of popular songs into it. The results? Two small mouse-like animals had come scampering out, rushing around the laboratory until the cat caught and ate them. But the Machine was a success.

It came to him shortly after, packed carefully in a wood crate, wired together and fully insured. He was quite excited as he set to work, taking the slats from it. Many fleeting notions must have coursed through his mind as he adjusted the controls and made ready for the first transformation. He had selected a priceless score to begin with, the score of the Mozart G Minor

Quintet. For a time he turned the pages, lost in thought, his mind far away. At last he carried it to the Machine and dropped it in.

Time passed. Labyrinth stood before it, waiting nervously, apprehensive and not really certain what would greet him when he opened the compartment. He was doing a fine and tragic work, it seemed to him, preserving the music of the great composers for all eternity. What would his thanks be? What would he find? What form would this all take, before it was over?

There were many question unanswered. The red light of the Machine was glinting, even as he meditated. The process was over, the transformation had already taken place. He opened the door.

“Good Lord!” he said. “This is very odd.”

A bird, not an animal, stepped out. The mozart bird was pretty, small and slender, with the flowing plumage of a peacock. It ran a little way across the room and then walked back to him, curious and friendly. Trembling, Doc Labyrinth bent down, his hand out. The mozart bird came near. Then, all at once, it swooped up into the air.

“Amazing,” he murmured. He coaxed the bird gently, patiently, and at last it fluttered down to him. Labyrinth stroked it for a long time, thinking. What would the rest of them be like? He could not guess. He carefully gathered up the mozart bird and put it into a box.

He was even more surprised the next day when the beethoven beetle came out, stern and dignified. That was the beetle I saw myself, climbing along his red blanket, intent and withdrawn, on some business of its own.

After that came the schubert animal. The schubert animal was silly, an adolescent sheep-creature that ran this way and that, foolish and wanting to play. Labyrinth sat down right then and there and did some heavy thinking.

Just what *were* survival factors? Was a flowing plume better than claws, better than sharp teeth? Labyrinth was stumped. He had expected an army of stout badger creatures, equipped with claws and scales, digging, fighting, ready to gnaw and kick. Was he getting the right thing? Yet who could say what was good for survival? — the dinosaurs had been well armed, but there were none of them left. In any case the Machine was built; it was too late to turn back, now.

Labyrinth went ahead, feeding the music of many composers into the Preserving Machine, one after another, until the woods behind his house was filled with creeping, bleating things that screamed and crashed in the night. There were many oddities that came out, creations that startled and astonished him. The Brahms insect had many legs sticking in all directions,

a vast, platter-shaped centipede. It was low and flat, with a coating of uniform fur. The Brahms insect liked to be by itself, and it went off promptly, taking great pains to avoid the Wagner animal who had come just before.

The Wagner animal was large and splashed with deep colors. It seemed to have quite a temper, and Doc Labyrinth was a little afraid of it, as were the Bach bugs, the round ball-like creatures, a whole flock of them, some large, some small, that had been obtained for the Forty-Eight Preludes and Fugues. And there was the Stravinsky bird, made up of curious fragments and bits, and many others besides.

So he let them go, off into the woods, and away they went, hopping and rolling and jumping as best they could. But already a sense of failure hung over him. Each time a creature came out he was astonished; he did not seem to have control over the results at all. It was out of his hands, subject to some strong, invisible law that had subtly taken over, and this worried him greatly. The creatures were bending, changing before a deep, impersonal force, a force that Labyrinth could neither see nor understand. And it made him afraid.

Labyrinth stopped talking. I waited for a while but he did not seem to be going on. I looked around at him. The old man was staring at me in a strange, plaintive way.

“I don’t really know much more,” he said. “I haven’t been back there for a long time, back in the woods. I’m afraid to. I know something is going on, but —”

“Why don’t we both go and take a look?”

He smiled with relief. “You wouldn’t mind, would you? I was hoping you might suggest that. This business is beginning to get me down.” He pushed his blanket aside and stood up, brushing himself off. “Let’s go then.”

We walked around the side of the house and along a narrow path, into the woods. Everything was wild and chaotic, overgrown and matted, an unkempt, unattended sea of green. Doc Labyrinth went first, pushing the branches off the path, stooping and wriggling to get through.

"Quite a place," I observed. We made our way for a time. The woods were dark and damp; it was almost sunset now, and a light mist was descending on us, drifting down through the leaves above.

"No one comes here." Then Doc stopped suddenly, looking around. "Maybe we'd better go and find my gun. I don't want anything to happen."

"You seem certain that things have got out of hand." I came up beside him and we stood together. "Maybe it's not as bad as you think."

Labyrinth looked around. He pushed some shrubbery back with his foot. "They're all around us, everywhere, watching us. Can't you feel it?"

I nodded absently. "What's this?" I lifted up a heavy, moldering branch, particles of fungus breaking from it. I pushed it out of the way. A mound lay outstretched, shapeless and indistinct, half buried in the soft ground.

"What is it?" I said again. Labyrinth stared down, his face tight and forlorn. He began to kick at the mound aimlessly. I felt uncomfortable. "What is it, for heaven's sake?" I said. "Do you know?"

Labyrinth looked slowly up at me. "It's the Schubert animal," he murmured. "Or it was, once. There isn't much left of it, any more."

The Schubert animal — that was the one that had run and leaped like a puppy, silly and wanting to play. I bent down, staring at the mound, pushing a few leaves and twigs from it. It was dead all right. Its mouth was open, its body had been ripped wide. Ants and vermin were already working on it, toiling endlessly away. It had begun to stink.

“But what happened?” Labyrinth said. He shook his head. “What could have done it?”

There was a sound. We turned quickly.

For a moment we saw nothing. Then a bush moved, and for the first time we made out its form. It must have been standing there watching us all the time. The creature was immense, thin and extended, with bright, intense eyes. To me, it looked something like a coyote, but much heavier. Its coat was matted and thick, its muzzle hung partly open as it gazed at us silently, studying us as if astonished to find us there.

“The Wagner animal,” Labyrinth said thickly. “But it’s changed. It’s changed. I hardly recognize it.”

The creature sniffed the air, its hackles up. Suddenly it moved back, into the shadows, and a moment later it was gone.

We stood for a while, not saying anything. At last Labyrinth stirred. “So, that’s what it was,” he said. “I can hardly believe it. But why? What —”

“Adaptation,” I said. “When you toss an ordinary house cat out it becomes wild. Or a dog.”

“Yes.” He nodded. “A dog becomes a wolf again, to stay alive. The law of the forest. I should have expected it. It happens to everything.”

I looked down at the corpse on the ground, and then around at the silent bushes. Adaptation — or maybe something worse. An idea was forming in my mind, but I said nothing, not right away.

“I’d like to see some more of them,” I said. “Some of the others. Let’s look around some more.”

He agreed. We began to poke slowly through the grass and weeds, pushing branches and foliage out of the way. I found a stick, but Labyrinth got down on his hands and knees, reaching and feeling, staring nearsightedly down.

“Even children turn into beasts,” I said. “You remember the wolf children of India? No one could believe they had been ordinary children.”

Labyrinth nodded. He was unhappy, and it was not hard to understand why. He had been wrong, mistaken in his original idea, and the consequences of it were just now beginning to become apparent to him. Music would survive as living creatures, but he had forgotten the lesson of the Garden of Eden: that once a thing has been fashioned it begins to exist on its own, and thus ceases to be the property of its creator to mold and direct as he wishes. God, watching man’s development, must have felt the same sadness — and the same humiliation — as Labyrinth, to see His creatures alter and change to meet the needs of survival.

That his musical creatures should survive could mean nothing to him any more, for the very thing he had created them to prevent, the brutalization of beautiful things, was happening in *them*, before his own eyes. Doc Labyrinth looked up at me suddenly, his face full of misery. He had ensured their survival, all right, but in so doing he had erased any meaning, any value in it. I tried to smile a little at him, but he promptly looked away again.

“Don’t worry so much about it,” I said. “It wasn’t much of a change for the Wagner animal. Wasn’t it pretty much that way anyhow, rough and tempermental? Didn’t it have a proclivity towards violence —”

I broke off. Doc Labyrinth had leaped back, jerking his hand out of the grass. He clutched his wrist, shuddering with pain.

“What is it?” I hurried over. Trembling, he held his little old hand out to me. “What is it? What happened?”

I turned the hand over. All across the back of it were marks, red cuts that swelled even as I watched. He had been stung, stung or bitten by something in the grass. I looked down, kicking the grass with my foot.

There was a stir. A little golden ball rolled quickly away, back toward the bushes. It was covered with spines like a nettle.

“Catch it!” Labyrinth cried. “Quick!”

I went after it, holding out my handkerchief, trying to avoid the spines. The sphere rolled frantically, trying to get away, but finally I got it into the handkerchief.

Labyrinth stared at the struggling handkerchief as I stood up. “I can hardly believe it,” he said. “We’d better go back to the house.”

“What is it?”

“One of the bach bugs. But it’s changed… .”

We made our way back along the path, toward the house, feeling our way through the darkness. I went first, pushing the branches aside, and Labyrinth followed behind, moody and withdrawn, rubbing his hand from time to time.

We entered the yard and went up to the back steps of the house, onto the porch. Labyrinth unlocked the door and we went into the kitchen. He snapped on the light and hurried to the sink to bathe his hand.

I took an empty fruit jar from the cupboard and carefully dropped the bach bug into it. The golden ball rolled testily around as I clamped the lid on. I sat down at the table. Neither of us spoke, Labyrinth at the sink, running cold water over his stung hand, I at the table, uncomfortably watching the golden ball in the fruit jar trying to find some way to escape.

“Well?” I said at last.

“There’s no doubt.” Labyrinth came over and sat down opposite me. “It’s undergone some metamorphosis. It certainly didn’t have poisoned spines to start with. You know, it’s a good thing that I played my Noah role carefully.”

“What do you mean?”

“I made them all neuter. They can’t reproduce. There will be no second generation. When these die, that will be the end of it.”

“I must say I’m glad you thought of that.”

“I wonder,” Labyrinth murmured. “I wonder how it would sound, now, this way.”

“What?”

“The sphere, the bach bug. That’s the real test, isn’t it? I could put it back through the Machine. We could see. Do you want to find out?”

“Whatever you say, Doc,” I said. “It’s up to you. But don’t get your hopes up too far.”

He picked up the fruit jar carefully and we walked downstairs, down the steep flights of steps to the cellar. I made out an immense column of dull metal rising up in the corner, by the laundry tubs. A strange feeling went through me. It was the Preserving Machine.

“So this is it,” I said.

“Yes, this is it.” Labyrinth turned the controls on and worked with them for a time. At last he took the jar and held it over the hopper. He removed

the lid carefully, and the bach bug dropped reluctantly from the jar, into the Machine. Labyrinth closed the hopper after it.

"Here we go," he said. He threw the control and the Machine began to operate. Labyrinth folded his arms and we waited. Outside the night came on, shutting out the light, squeezing it out of existence. At last an indicator on the face of the Machine blinked red. The Doc turned the control to OFF and we stood in silence, neither of us wanting to be the one who opened it.

"Well?" I said finally. "Which one of us is going to look?"

Labyrinth stirred. He pushed the slot-piece aside and reached into the Machine. His fingers came out grasping a slim sheet, a score of music. He handed it to me. "This is the result," he said. "We can go upstairs and play it."

We went back up to the music room. Labyrinth sat down before the grand piano and I passed him back the score. He opened it and studied it for a moment, his face blank, without expression. Then he began to play.

I listened to the music. It was hideous. I have never heard anything like it. It was distorted, diabolical, without sense or meaning, except, perhaps, an alien, disconcerting meaning that should never have been there. I could believe only with the greatest effort that it had once been a Bach Fugue, part of a most orderly and respected work.

"That settles it," Labyrinth said. He stood up, took the score in his hands, and tore it to shreds.

As we made our way down the path to my car I said, "I guess the struggle for survival is a force bigger than any human ethos. It makes our precious morals and manners look a little thin."

Labyrinth agreed. "Perhaps nothing can be done, then, to save those manners and morals."

“Only time will tell,” I said. “Even though this method failed, some other may work; something that we can’t foresee or predict now may come along, some day.”

I said good night and got into my car. It was pitch dark; night had fallen completely. I switched on my headlights and moved off down the road, driving into the utter darkness. There were no other cars in sight anywhere. I was alone, and very cold.

At the corner I stopped, slowing down to change gears. Something moved suddenly at the curb, something by the base of a huge sycamore tree, in the darkness. I peered out, trying to see what it was.

At the base of the sycamore tree a huge dun-colored beetle was building something, putting a bit of mud into place on a strange, awkward structure. I watched the beetle for a time, puzzled and curious, until at last it noticed me and stopped. The beetle turned abruptly and entered its building, snapping the door firmly shut behind it.

I drove away.

Expendable

The man came out on the front porch and examined the day. Bright and cold — with dew on the lawns. He buttoned his coat and put his hands in his pockets.

As the man started down the steps the two caterpillars waiting by the mailbox twitched with interest.

“There he goes,” the first one said. “Send in your report.”

As the other began to rotate his vanes the man stopped, turning quickly.

“I heard that,” he said. He brought his foot down against the wall, scraping the caterpillars off, onto the concrete. He crushed them.

Then he hurried down the path to the sidewalk. As he walked he looked around him. In the cherry tree a bird was hopping, pecking bright-eyed at the cherries. The man studied him. All right? Or— The bird flew off. Birds all right. No harm from them.

He went on. At the corner he brushed against a spider web, crossed from the bushes to the telephone pole. His heart pounded. He tore away, batting the air. As he went on he glanced over his shoulder. The spider was coming slowly down the bush, feeling out the damage to his web.

Hard to tell about spiders. Difficult to figure out. More facts needed — No contact, yet.

He waited at the bus stop, stomping his feet to keep them warm.

The bus came and he boarded it, feeling a sudden pleasure as he took his seat with all the warm, silent people, staring indifferently ahead. A vague

flow of security poured through him.

He grinned, and relaxed, the first time in days.

The bus went down the street.

Tirmus waved his antennae excitedly.

“Vote, then, if you want.” He hurried past them, up onto the mound. “But let me say what I said yesterday, before you start.”

“We already know it all,” Lala said impatiently. “Let’s get moving. We have the plans worked out. What’s holding us up?”

“More reason for me to speak.” Tirmus gazed around at the assembled gods. “The entire Hill is ready to march against the giant in question. Why? We know he can’t communicate to his fellows — It’s out of the question. The type of vibration, the language they use, makes it impossible to convey such ideas as he holds about us, about our —”

“Nonsense.” Lala stepped up. “Giants communicate well enough.”

“There is no record of a giant having made known information about us!”

The army moved restlessly.

“Go ahead,” Tirmus said. “But it’s a waste of effort. He’s harmless — cut off. Why take all the time and —”

“Harmless?” Lala stared at him. “Don’t you understand? He knows!”

Tirmus walked away from the mound. “I’m against unnecessary violence. We should save our strength. Someday we’ll need it.”

The vote was taken. As expected, the army was in favor of moving against the giant. Tirmus sighed and began stroking out the plans on the ground.

“This is the location that he takes. He can be expected to appear there at period-end. Now, as I see the situation —”

He went on, laying out the plans in the soft soil.

One of the gods leaned toward another, antennae touching. “This giant. He doesn’t stand a chance. In a way, I feel sorry for him. How’d he happen to butt in?”

“Accident.” The other grinned. “You know, the way they do, barging around.”

“It’s too bad for him, though.”

It was nightfall. The street was dark and deserted. Along the sidewalk the man came, newspaper under his arm. He walked quickly, glancing around him. He skirted around the big tree growing by the curb and leaped agilely into the street. He crossed the street and gained the opposite side. As he turned the corner he entered the web, sewn from bush to telephone pole. Automatically he fought it, brushing it off him. As the strands broke a thin humming came to him, metallic and wiry.

“…wait!”

He paused.

“…careful… inside… wait…”

His jaw set. The last strands broke in his hands and he walked on. Behind him the spider moved in the fragment of his web, watching. The man looked back.

“Nuts to you,” he said. “I’m not taking any chances, standing there all tied up.”

He went on, along the sidewalk, to his path. He skipped up the path, avoiding the darkening bushes. On the porch he found his key, fitting it into the lock.

He paused. Inside? Better than outside, especially at night. Night a bad time. Too much movement under the bushes. Not good. He opened the door and stepped inside. The rug lay ahead of him, a pool of blackness. Across on the other side he made out the form of the lamp.

Four steps to the lamp. His foot came up. He stopped.

What did the spider say? Wait? He waited, listening. Silence.

He took his cigarette lighter and flicked it on.

The carpet of ants swelled toward him, rising up in a flood. He leaped aside, out onto the porch. The ants came rushing, hurrying, scratching across the floor in the half light.

The man jumped down to the ground and around the side of the house. When the first ants came flowing over the porch he was already spinning the faucet handle rapidly, gathering up the hose.

The burst of water lifted the ants up and scattered them, flinging them away. The man adjusted the nozzle, squinting through the mist. He advanced, turning the hard stream from side to side.

“God damn you,” he said, his teeth locked. “Waiting inside —”

He was frightened. Inside — never before! In the night cold sweat came out on his face. Inside. They had never got inside before. Maybe a moth or

two, and flies, of course. But they were harmless, fluttery, noisy —

A carpet of ants!

Savagely, he sprayed them until they broke rank and fled into the lawn, into the bushes, under the house.

He sat down on the walk, holding the hose, trembling from head to foot.

They really meant it. Not an anger raid, annoyed, spasmodic; but planned, an attack, worked out. They had waited for him. One more step.

Thank God for the spider.

Presently he shut the hose off and stood up. No sound; silence everywhere. The bushes rustled suddenly. Beetle? Something black scurried — he put his foot on it. A messenger, probably. Fast runner. He went gingerly inside the dark house, feeling his way by the cigarette lighter.

Later, he sat at his desk, the spray gun beside him, heavy-duty steel and copper. He touched its damp surface with his fingers.

Seven o’clock. Behind him the radio played softly. He reached over and moved the desk lamp so that it shone on the floor beside the desk.

He lit a cigarette and took some writing paper and his fountain pen. He paused, thinking.

So they really wanted him, badly enough to plan it out. Bleak despair descended over him like a torrent. What could he do? Whom could he go to? Or tell. He clenched his fists, sitting bolt upright in the chair.

The spider slid down beside him onto the desk top. “Sorry. Hope you aren’t frightened, as in the poem.”

The man stared. “Are you the same one? The one at the corner? The one who warned me?”

“No. That’s somebody else. A Spinner. I’m strictly a Cruncher. Look at my jaws.” He opened and shut his mouth. “I bite them up.”

The man smiled. “Good for you.”

“Sure. Do you know how many there are of us in — say — an acre of land. Guess.”

“A thousand.”

“No. Two and a half million: Of all kinds. Crunchers, like me, or Spinners, or Stingers.”

“Stingers?”

“The best. Let’s see.” The spider thought. “For instance, the black widow, as you call her. Very valuable.” He paused. “Just one thing.”

“What’s that?”

“We have our problems. The gods —”

“Gods!”

“Ants, as you call them. The leaders. They’re beyond us. Very unfortunate. They have an awful taste — makes one sick. We have to leave them for the birds.”

The man stood up. “Birds? Are they —”

“Well, we have an arrangement. This has been going on for ages. I’ll give you the story. We have some time left.”

The man’s heart contracted. “Time left? What do you mean?”

“Nothing. A little trouble later on, I understand. Let me give you the background. I don’t think you know it.”

“Go ahead. I’m listening.” He stood up and began to walk back and forth.

“*They* were running the Earth pretty well, about a billion years ago. You see, men came from some other planet. Which one? I don’t know. They landed and found the Earth quite well cultivated by them. There was a war.”

“So we’re the invaders,” the man murmured.

“Sure. The war reduced both sides to barbarism, them and yourselves. You forgot how to attack, and they degenerated into closed social factions, ants, termites —”

“I see.”

“The last group of you that knew the full story started us going. We were bred” — the spider chuckled in its own fashion — “bred some place for this worthwhile purpose. We keep them down very well. You know what they call us? The Eaters. Unpleasant, isn’t it?”

Two more spiders came drifting down on their webstrands, alighting on the desk. The three spiders went into a huddle.

“More serious than I thought,” the Cruncher said easily. “Didn’t know the whole dope. The Stinger here —”

The black widow came to the edge of the desk. “Giant,” she piped, metallically. “I’d like to talk with you.”

“Go ahead,” the man said.

“There’s going to be some trouble here. They’re moving, coming here, a lot of them. We thought we’d stay with you awhile. Get in on it.”

“I see.” The man nodded. He licked his lips, running his fingers shakily through his hair. “Do you think — that is, what are the chances —”

“Chances?” The Stinger undulated thoughtfully. “Well, we’ve been in this work a long time. Almost a million years. I think that we have the edge over them, in spite of the drawbacks. Our arrangements with the birds, and of course, with the toads —”

“I think we can save you,” the Cruncher put in cheerfully. “As a matter of fact, we look forward to events like this.”

From under the floorboards came a distant scratching sound, the noise of a multitude of tiny claws and wings, vibrating faintly, remotely. The man heard. His body sagged all over.

“You’re really certain? You think you can do it?” He wiped the perspiration from his lips and picked up the spray gun, still listening.

The sound was growing, swelling beneath them, under the floor, under their feet. Outside the house bushes rustled and a few moths flew up against the window. Louder and louder the sound grew, beyond and below, everywhere, a rising hum of anger and determination. The man looked from side to side.

“You’re sure you can do it?” he murmured. “You can really save me?”

“Oh,” the Stinger said, embarrassed. “I didn’t mean *that.* I meant the species, the race… not you as an individual.”

The man gaped at him and the three Eaters shifted uneasily. More moths burst against the window. Under them the floor stirred and heaved.

“I see,” the man said. “I’m sorry I misunderstood you.”

The Variable Man

I

Security Commissioner Reinhart rapidly climbed the front steps and entered the Council building. Council guards stepped quickly aside and he entered the familiar place of great whirring machines. His thin face rapt, eyes alight with emotion, Reinhart gazed intently up at the central SRB computer, studying its reading.

"Straight gain for the last quarter," observed Kaplan, the lab organizer. He grinned proudly as if personally responsible. "Not bad, Commissioner."

"We're catching up to them," Reinhart retorted. "But too damn slowly. We must finally go over — and soon."

Kaplan was in a talkative mood. "We design new offensive weapons, they counter with improved defenses. And nothing is actually made! Continual improvement, but neither we nor Centaurus can stop designing long enough to stabilize for production."

"It will end," Reinhart stated coldly, "as soon as Terra turns out a weapon for which Centaurus can build no defense."

"Every weapon has a defense. Design and discord. Immediate obsolescence. Nothing lasts long enough to —"

"What we count on is the *lag,"* Reinhart broke in, annoyed. His hard gray eyes bored into the lab organizer and Kaplan slunk back. "The time lag between our offensive design and their counter development. The lag varies." He waved impatiently toward the massed banks of SRB machines. "As you well know."

At this moment, 9:30 AM, May 7, 2136, the statistical ratio on the SRB machines stood at 21-17 on the Centauran side of the ledger. All facts considered, the odds favored a successful repulsion by Proxima Centaurus of a Terran military attack. The ratio was based on the total information known to the SRB machines, on a gestalt of the vast flow of data that poured in endlessly from all sectors of the Sol and Centaurus systems.

21-17 on the Centauran side. But a month ago it had been 24-18 in the enemy's favor. Things were improving, slowly but steadily. Centaurus, older and less virile than Terra, was unable to match Terra's rate of technocratic advance. Terra was pulling ahead.

"If we went to war now," Reinhart said thoughtfully, "we would lose. We're not far enough along to risk an overt attack." A harsh, ruthless glow twisted across his handsome features, distorting them into a stern mask. "But the odds are moving in our favor. Our offensive designs are gradually gaining on their defenses."

"Let's hope the war comes soon," Kaplan agreed. "We're all on edge. This damn waiting… ."

The war would come soon. Reinhart knew it intuitively. The air was full of tension, the *elan.* He left the SRB rooms and hurried down the corridor to his own elaborately guarded office in the Security wing. It wouldn't be long. He could practically feel the hot breath of destiny on his neck — for him a pleasant feeling. His thin lips set in a humorless smile, showing an even line of white teeth against his tanned skin. It made him feel good, all right. He'd been working at it a long time.

First contact, a hundred years earlier, had ignited instant conflict between Proxima Centauran outposts and exploring Terran raiders. Flash fights, sudden eruptions of fire and energy beams.

And then the long, dreary years of inaction between enemies where contact required years of travel, even at nearly the speed of light. The two systems were evenly matched. Screen against screen. Warship against

power station. The Centauran Empire surrounded Terra, an iron ring that couldn't be broken, rusty and corroded as it was. New weapons had to be conceived, if Terra was to break out.

Through the windows of his office, Reinhart could see endless buildings and streets. Terrans hurrying back and forth. Bright specks that were commute ships, little eggs that carried businessmen and white-collar workers around. The huge transport tubes that shot masses of workmen to factories and labor camps from their housing units. All these people, waiting to break out. Waiting for the day.

Reinhart snapped on his vidscreen, the confidential channel. "Give me Military Designs," he ordered sharply.

He sat tense, his wiry body taut, as the vidscreen warmed into life. Abruptly he was facing the hulking image of Peter Sherikov, director of the vast network of labs under the Ural Mountains.

Sherikov's great bearded features hardened as he recognized Reinhart.

His bushy black eyebrows pulled up in a sullen line. "What do you want? You know I'm busy. We have too much work to do, as it is. Without being bothered by — politicians."

"I'm dropping over your way," Reinhart answered lazily. He adjusted the cuff of his immaculate gray cloak. "I want a full description of your work and whatever progress you've made."

"You'll find a regular departmental report plate filed in the usual way, around your office someplace. If you'll refer to that you'll know exactly what we —"

"I'm not interested in that. I want to *see* what you're doing. And I expect you to be prepared to describe your work fully. I'll be there shortly. Half an hour."

Reinhart cut the circuit. Sherikov's heavy features dwindled and faded. Reinhart relaxed, letting his breath out. Too bad he had to work with Sherikov. He had never liked the man. The big Polish scientist was an individualist, refusing to integrate himself with society. Independent, atomistic in outlook. He held concepts of the individual as an end, diametrically contrary to the accepted organic state Weltansicht.

But Sherikov was the leading research scientist, in charge of the Military Designs Department. And on Designs the whole future of Terra depended. Victory over Centaurus — or more waiting, bottled up in the Sol system, surrounded by a rotting, hostile Empire, now sinking into ruin and decay, yet still strong.

Reinhart got quickly to his feet and left the office. He hurried down the hall and out of the Council building.

A few minutes later he was heading across the mid-morning sky in his highspeed cruiser, toward the Asiatic landmass, the vast Ural mountain range. Toward the Military Designs labs.

Sherikov met him at the entrance. "Look here, Reinhart. Don't think you're going to order me around. I'm not going to —"

"Take it easy." Reinhart fell into step beside the bigger man. They passed through the check and into the auxiliary labs. "No immediate coercion will be exerted over you or your staff. You're free to continue your work as you see fit — for the present. Let's get this straight. My concern is to integrate your work with our total social needs. As long as your work is sufficiently productive —"

Reinhart stopped in his tracks.

"Pretty, isn't he?" Sherikov said ironically.

"What the hell is it?"

“Icarus, we call him. Remember the Greek myth? The legend of Icarus. Icarus flew… This Icarus is going to fly, one of these days.” Sherikov shrugged. “You can examine him, if you want. I suppose this is what you came here to see.”

Reinhart advanced slowly. “This is the weapon you’ve been working on?”

“How does he look?”

Rising up in the center of the chamber was a squat metal cylinder, a great ugly cone of dark gray. Technicians circled around it, wiring up the exposed relay banks. Reinhart caught a glimpse of endless tubes and filaments, a maze of wires and terminals and parts criss-crossing each other, layer on layer.

“What is it?” Reinhart perched on the edge of a workbench, leaning his big shoulders against the wall.

“An idea of Jamison Hedge — the same man who developed our instantaneous interstellar vidcasts forty years ago. He was trying to find a method of faster than light travel when he was killed, destroyed along with most of his work. After that ftl research was abandoned. It looked as if there were no future in it.”

“Wasn’t it shown that nothing could travel faster than light?”

“The interstellar vidcasts do! No, Hedge developed a valid ftl drive. He managed to propel an object at fifty times the speed of light. But as the object gained speed, its length began to diminish and its mass increased. This was in line with familiar twentieth-century concepts of mass-energy transformation. We conjectured that as Hedge’s object gained velocity it would continue to lose length and gain mass until its length became nil and its mass infinite. Nobody can imagine such an object.”

“Goon.”

“But what actually occurred is this. Hedge’s object continued to lose length and gain mass until it reached the theoretical limit of velocity, the speed of light. At that point the object, still gaining speed, simply ceased to exist. Having no length, it ceased to occupy space. It disappeared. However, the object had not been *destroyed.* It continued on its way, gaining momentum each moment, moving in an arc across the galaxy, away from the Sol system. Hedge’s object entered some other realm of being, beyond our powers of conception. The next phase of Hedge’s experiment consisted in a search for some way to slow the ftl object down, back to a sub-ftl speed, hence back into our universe. This counterprinciple was eventually worked out.”

“With what result?”

“The death of Hedge and destruction of most of his equipment. His experimental object, in reentering the space-time universe, came into being in space already occupied by matter. Possessing an incredible mass, just below infinity level, Hedge’s object exploded in a titanic cataclysm. It was obvious that no space travel was possible with such a drive. Virtually all space contains *some* matter. To reenter space would bring automatic destruction. Hedge had found his ftl drive and his counterprinciple, but no one before this has been able to put them to any use.”

Reinhart walked over toward the great metal cylinder. Sherikov jumped down and followed him. “I don’t get it,” Reinhart said. “You said the principle is no good for space travel.”

“That’s right.”

“What’s this for, then? If the ship explodes as soon as it returns to our universe —”

“This is not a ship.” Sherikov grinned slyly. “Icarus is the first practical application of Hedge’s principles. Icarus is a bomb.”

“So this is our weapon,” Reinhart said. “A bomb. An immense bomb.”

“A bomb, moving at a velocity greater than light. A bomb which will not exist in our universe. The Centaurans won’t be able to detect or stop it. How could they? As soon as it passes the speed of light it will cease to exist — beyond all detection.”

“But —”

“Icarus will be launched outside the lab, on the surface. He will align himself with Proxima Centaurus, gaining speed rapidly. By the time he reaches his destination he will be traveling at ftl-100. Icarus will be brought back to this universe within Centaurus itself. The explosion should destroy the star and wash away most of its planets — including their central hub-planet, Armun. There is no way they can halt Icarus, once he has been launched. No defense is possible. Nothing can stop him. It is a real fact.”

“When will it be ready?”

Sherikov’s eyes flickered. “Soon.”

“Exactly how soon?”

The big Pole hesitated. “As a matter of fact, there’s only one thing holding us back.”

Sherikov led Reinhart around to the other side of the lab. He pushed a lab guard out of the way.

“See this?” He tapped a round globe, open at one end, the size of a grapefruit. “This is holding us up.”

“What is it?”

“The central control turret. This thing brings Icarus back to sub-ftl flight at the correct moment. It must be absolutely accurate. Icarus will be within the star only a matter of a microsecond. If the turret does not function exactly, Icarus will pass out the other side and shoot beyond the Centauran system.”

“How near completed is this turret?”

Sherikov hedged uncertainly, spreading out his big hands. “Who can say? It must be wired with infinitely minute equipment — microscope grapples and wires invisible to the naked eye.”

“Can you name any completion date?”

Sherikov reached into his coat and brought out a manila folder. “I’ve drawn up the data for the SRB machines, giving a date of completion. You can go ahead and feed it. I entered ten days as the maximum period. The machines can work from that.”

Reinhart accepted the folder cautiously. “You’re sure about the date? I’m not convinced I can trust you, Sherikov.”

Sherikov’s features darkened. “You’ll have to take a chance, Commissioner. I don’t trust you any more than you trust me. I know how much you’d like an excuse to get me out of here and one of your puppets in.”

Reinhart studied the huge scientist thoughtfully. Sherikov was going to be a hard nut to crack. Designs was responsible to Security, not the Council. Sherikov was losing ground — but he was still a potential danger. Stubborn, individualistic, refusing to subordinate his welfare to the general good.

“All right.” Reinhart put the folder slowly away in his coat. “I’ll feed it. But you better be able to come through. There can’t be any slip-ups. Too much hangs on the next few days.”

“If the odds change in our favor are you going to give the mobilization order?”

“Yes,” Reinhart stated. “I’ll give the order the moment I see the odds change.”

Standing in front of the machines, Reinhart waited nervously for the results. It was two o’clock in the afternoon. The day was warm, a pleasant May afternoon. Outside the building the daily life of the planet went on as usual.

As usual? Not exactly. The feeling was in the air, an expanding excitement growing every day. Terra had waited a long time. The attack on Proxima Centaurus had to come — and the sooner the better. The ancient Centauran Empire hemmed in Terra, bottled the human race up in its one system. Avast, suffocating net draped across the heavens, cutting Terra off from the bright diamonds beyond … And it had to end.

The SRB machines whirred, the visible combination disappearing. For a time no ratio showed. Reinhart tensed, his body rigid. He waited.

The new ratio appeared.

Reinhart gasped. 7-6. Toward Terra!

Within five minutes the emergency mobilization alert had been flashed to all Government departments. The Council and President Duffe had been called to immediate session. Everything was happening fast.

But there was no doubt. 7-6. In Terra's favor. Reinhart hurried frantically to get his papers in order, in time for the Council session.

At histo-research the message plate was quickly pulled from the confidential slot and rushed across the central lab to the chief official.

"Look at this!" Fredman dropped the plate on his superior's desk. "Look at it!"

Harper picked up the plate, scanning it rapidly. "Sounds like the real thing. I didn't think we'd live to see it."

Fredman left the room, hurrying down the hall. He entered the time bubble office. "Where's the bubble?" he demanded, looking around.

One of the technicians looked slowly up. "Back about two hundred years. We're coming up with interesting data on the War of 1914. According to material the bubble has already brought up —"

"Cut it. We're through with routine work. Get the bubble back to the present. From now on all equipment has to be free for Military work."

"But — the bubble is regulated automatically."

"You can bring it back manually."

"It's risky." The technician hedged. "If the emergency requires it, I suppose we could take a chance and cut the automatic."

"The emergency requires *everything."* Fredman said feelingly.

"But the odds might change back," Margaret Duffe, President of the Council, said nervously. "Any minute they can revert."

“This is our chance!” Reinhart snapped, his temper rising. “What the hell’s the matter with you? We’ve waited years for this.”

The Council buzzed with excitement. Margaret Duffe hesitated uncertainly, her blue eyes clouded with worry. “I realize the opportunity is here. At least, statistically. But the new odds have just appeared. How do we know they’ll last? They stand on the basis of a single weapon.”

“You’re wrong. You don’t grasp the situation.” Reinhart held himself in check with great effort. “Sherikov’s weapon tipped the ratio in our favor. But the odds have been moving in our direction for months. It was only a question of time. The new balance was inevitable, sooner or later. It’s not just Sherikov. He’s only one factor in this. It’s all nine planets of the Sol system — not a single man.”

One of the Councilmen stood up. “The President must be aware the entire planet is eager to end this waiting. All our activities for the past eighty years have been directed toward —”

Reinhart moved close to the slender President of the Council. “If you don’t approve the war, there probably will be mass rioting. Public reaction will be strong. Damn strong. And you know it.”

Margaret Duffe shot him a cold glance. “You sent out the emergency order to force my hand. You were fully aware of what you were doing. You knew once the order was out there’d be no stopping things.”

A murmur rushed through the Council, gaining volume. “We have to approve the war!… We’re committed!… It’s too late to turn back!”

Shouts, angry voices, insistent waves of sound lapped around Margaret Duffe. “I’m as much for the war as anybody,” she said sharply. “I’m only urging moderation. An inter-system war is a big thing. We’re going to war because a machine says we have a statistical chance of winning.”

“There’s no use starting the war unless we can win it,” Reinhart said. “The SRB machines tell us whether we can win.”

“They tell us our *chance* of winning. They don’t guarantee anything.”

“What more can we ask, besides a good chance of winning?”

Margaret Duffe clamped her jaw together tightly. “All right. I hear all the clamor. I won’t stand in the way of Council approval. The vote can go ahead.” Her cold, alert eyes appraised Reinhart. “Especially since the emergency order has already been sent out to all Government departments.”

“Good.” Reinhart stepped away with relief. “Then it’s settled. We can finally go ahead with full mobilization.”

Mobilization proceeded rapidly. The next forty-eight hours were alive with activity.

Reinhart attended a policy-level Military briefing in the Council rooms, conducted by Fleet Commander Carleton.

“You can see our strategy,” Carleton said. He traced a diagram on the blackboard with a wave of his hand. “Sherikov states it’ll take eight more days to complete the ftl bomb. During that time the fleet we have near the Centauran system will take up positions. As the bomb goes off the fleet will begin operations against the remaining Centauran ships. Many will no doubt survive the blast, but with Armun gone we should be able to handle them.”

Reinhart took Commander Carleton’s place. “I can report on the economic situation. Every factory on Terra is converted to arms production. With Armun out of the way we should be able to promote mass insurrection among the Centauran colonies. An inter-system Empire is hard to maintain, even with ships that approach light speed. Local warlords should pop up all over the place. We want to have weapons available for them and ships

starting *now* to reach them in time. Eventually we hope to provide a unifying principle around which the colonies can all collect. Our interest is more economic than political. They can have any kind of government they want, as long as they act as supply areas for us. As our eight system planets act now."

Carleton resumed his report. "Once the Centauran fleet has been scattered we can begin the crucial stage of the war. The landing of men and supplies from the ships we have waiting in all key areas throughout the Centauran system. In this stage —"

Reinhart moved away. It was hard to believe only two days had passed since the mobilization order had been sent out. The whole system was alive, functioning with feverish activity. Countless problems were being solved — but much remained.

He entered the lift and ascended to the SRB room, curious to see if there had been any change in the machines' reading. He found it the same. So far so good. Did the Centaurans know about Icarus? No doubt; but there wasn't anything they could do about it. At least, not in eight days.

Kaplan came over to Reinhart, sorting a new batch of data that had come in. The lab organizer searched through his data. "An amusing item came in. It might interest you." He handed a message plate to Reinhart. It was from histo-research:

May 9, 2136

This is to report that in bringing the research time bubble up to the present the manual return was used for the first time. Therefore a clean break was not made and a quantity of material from the past was brought forward. This material included an individual from the early twentieth century who escaped from the lab immediately. He has not yet been taken into protective custody. Histo-research regrets this incident, but attributes it to the emergency.

E. Fredman

Reinhart handed the plate back to Kaplan. “Interesting. A man from the past — hauled into the middle of the biggest war the universe has seen.”

“Strange things happen. I wonder what the machines will think.”

“Hard to say. Probably nothing.” Reinhart left the room and hurried along the corridor to his own office.

As soon as he was inside he called Sherikov on the vidscreen, using the confidential line.

The Pole’s heavy features appeared. “Good day, Commissioner. How’s the war effort?”

“Fine. How’s the turret wiring proceeding?”

A faint frown flickered across Sherikov’s face. “As a matter of fact, Commissioner —”

“What’s the matter?” Reinhart said sharply.

Sherikov floundered. “You know how these things are. I’ve taken my crew off it and tried robot workers. They have greater dexterity, but they can’t make decisions. This calls for more than mere dexterity. This calls for —” He searched for the word. “— for an *artist.*”

Reinhart’s face hardened. “Listen, Sherikov. You have eight days left to complete the bomb. The data given to the SRB machines contained that information. The 7-6 ratio is based on that estimate. If you don’t come through —”

Sherikov twisted in embarrassment. “Don’t get excited, Commissioner. We’ll complete it.”

“I hope so. Call me as soon as it’s done.” Reinhart snapped off the connection. If Sherikov let them down he’d have him taken out and shot. The whole war depended on the ftl bomb.

The vidscreen glowed again. Reinhart snapped it on. Kaplan’s face formed on it. The lab organizer’s face was pale and frozen. “Commissioner, you better come up to the SRB office. Something’s happened.”

“What is it?”

“I’ll show you.”

Alarmed, Reinhart hurried out of his office and down the corridor. He found Kaplan standing in front of the SRB machines. “What’s the story?” Reinhart demanded. He glanced down at the reading. It was unchanged.

Kaplan held up a message plate nervously. “A moment ago I fed this into the machines. After I saw the results I quickly removed it. It’s that item I showed you. From histo-research. About the man from the past.”

“What happened when you fed it?”

Kaplan swallowed unhappily. “I’ll show you. I’ll do it again. Exactly as before.” He fed the plate into a moving intake belt. “Watch the visible figures,” Kaplan muttered.

Reinhart watched, tense and rigid. For a moment nothing happened. 7-6 continued to show. Then — The figures disappeared. The machines faltered. New figures showed briefly. 4-24 for Centaurus. Reinhart gasped, suddenly sick with apprehension. But the figures vanished. New figures appeared. 16-38 for Centaurus. Then 48-86. 79-15 in Terra’s favor. Then nothing. The machines whirred, but nothing happened.

Nothing at all. No figures. Only a blank.

“What’s it mean?” Reinhart muttered, dazed.

“It’s fantastic. We didn’t think this could —”

“What’s happened?”

“The machines aren’t able to handle the item. No reading can come. It’s data they can’t integrate. They can’t use it for prediction material, and it throws off all their other figures.”

“Why?”

“It’s — it’s a variable.” Kaplan was shaking, white-lipped and pale. “Something from which no inference can be made. The man from the past. The machines can’t deal with him. The variable man!”

II

Thomas Cole was sharpening a knife with his whetstone when the tornado hit.

The knife belonged to the lady in the big green house. Every time Cole came by with his Fixit cart the lady had something to be sharpened. Once in a while she gave him a cup of coffee, hot black coffee from an old bent pot. He liked that fine; he enjoyed good coffee.

The day was drizzly and overcast. Business had been bad. An automobile had scared his two horses. On bad days less people were outside and he had to get down from the cart and go to ring doorbells.

But the man in the yellow house had given him a dollar for fixing his electric refrigerator. Nobody else had been able to fix it, not even the factory man. The dollar would go a long way. A dollar was a lot.

He knew it was a tornado even before it hit him. Everything was silent. He was bent over his whetstone, the reins between his knees, absorbed in his work.

He had done a good job on the knife; he was almost finished. He spat on the blade and was holding it up to see — and then the tornado came.

All at once it was there, completely around him. Nothing but grayness. He and the cart and horses seemed to be in a calm spot in the center of the tornado. They were moving in a great silence, gray mist everywhere.

And while he was wondering what to do, and how to get the old lady’s knife back to her, all at once there was a bump and the tornado tipped him

over, sprawled out on the ground. The horses screamed in fear, struggling to pick themselves up. Cole got quickly to his feet.

Where was he?

The grayness was gone. White walls stuck up on all sides. A deep light gleamed down, not daylight but something like it. The team was pulling the cart on its side, dragging it along, tools and equipment falling out. Cole righted the cart, leaping up onto the seat.

And for the first time saw the people.

Men, with astonished white faces, in some sort of uniforms. And a feeling of danger!

Cole headed the team toward the door. Hoofs thundered steel against steel as they pounded through the doorway, scattering the astonished men in all directions. He was out in a wide hall. A building, like a hospital.

The hall divided. More men were coming, spilling from all sides.

Shouting and milling in excitement, like white ants. Something cut past him, a beam of dark violet. It seared off a corner of the cart, leaving the wood smoking.

Cole felt fear. He kicked at the terrified horses. They reached a big door, crashing wildly against it. The door gave — and they were outside, bright sunlight blinking down on them. For a sickening second the cart tilted, almost turning over. Then the horses gained speed, racing across an open field, toward a distant line of green, Cole holding tightly to the reins.

Behind him the little white-faced men had come out and were standing in a group, gesturing frantically. He could hear their faint shrill shouts.

But he had got away. He was safe. He slowed the horses down and began to breathe again.

The woods were artificial. Some kind of park. But the park was wild and overgrown. A dense jungle of twisted plants. Everything growing in confusion.

The park was empty. No one was there. By the position of the sun he could tell it was either early morning or late afternoon. The smell of the flowers and grass, the dampness of the leaves, indicated morning. It had been late afternoon when the tornado had picked him up. And the sky had been overcast and cloudy.

Cole considered. Clearly, he had been carried a long way. The hospital, the men with white faces, the odd lighting, the accented words he had caught — everything indicated he was no longer in Nebraska — maybe not even in the United States.

Some of his tools had fallen out and gotten lost along the way. Cole collected everything that remained, sorting them, running his fingers over each tool with affection. Some of the little chisels and wood gouges were gone. The bit box had opened, and most of the smaller bits had been lost. He gathered up those that remained and replaced them tenderly in the box. He took a keyhole saw down, and with an oil rag wiped it carefully and replaced it.

Above the cart the sun rose slowly in the sky. Cole peered up, his horny hand over his eyes. A big man, stoop-shouldered, his chin gray and stubbled. His clothes wrinkled and dirty. But his eyes were clear, a pale blue, and his hands were finely made.

He could not stay in the park. They had seen him ride that way; they would be looking for him.

Far above something shot rapidly across the sky. A tiny black dot moving with incredible haste. A second dot followed. The two dots were

gone almost before he saw them. They were utterly silent.

Cole frowned, perturbed. The dots made him uneasy. He would have to keep moving — and looking for food. His stomach was already beginning to rumble and groan.

Work. There was plenty he could do: gardening, sharpening, grinding, repair work on machines and clocks, fixing all kinds of household things. Even painting and odd jobs and carpentry and chores.

He could do anything. Anything people wanted done. For a meal and pocket money.

Thomas Cole urged the team into life, moving forward. He sat hunched over in the seat, watching intently, as the Fixit cart rolled slowly across the tangled grass, through the jungle of trees and flowers.

Reinhart hurried, racing his cruiser at top speed, followed by a second ship, a military escort. The ground sped by below him, a blur of gray and green.

The remains of New York lay spread out, a twisted, blunted ruin overgrown with weeds and grass. The great atomic wars of the twentieth century had turned virtually the whole seaboard area into an endless waste of slag.

Slag and weeds below him. And then the sudden tangle that had been Central Park.

Histo-research came into sight. Reinhart swooped down, bringing his cruiser to rest at the small supply field behind the main buildings.

Harper, the chief official of the department, came over quickly as soon as Reinhart’s ship landed.

“Frankly, we don’t understand why you consider this matter important,” Harper said uneasily.

Reinhart shot him a cold glance. “I’ll be the judge of what’s important. Are you the one who gave the order to bring the bubble back manually?”

“Fredman gave the actual order. In line with your directive to have all facilities ready for —”

Reinhart headed toward the entrance of the research building. “Where is Fredman?”

“Inside.”

“I want to see him. Let’s go.”

Fredman met them inside. He greeted Reinhart calmly, showing no emotion. “Sorry to cause you trouble, Commissioner. We were trying to get the station in order for the war. We wanted the bubble back as quickly as possible.” He eyed Reinhart curiously. “No doubt the man and his cart will soon be picked up by your police.”

“I want to know everything that happened, in exact detail.”

Fredman shifted uncomfortably. “There’s not much to tell. I gave the order to have the automatic setting canceled and the bubble brought back manually. At the moment the signal reached it, the bubble was passing through the spring of 1913. As it broke loose, it tore off a piece of ground on which this person and his cart were located. The person naturally was brought up to the present, inside the bubble.”

“Didn’t any of your instruments tell you the bubble was loaded?”

“We were too excited to take any readings. Half an hour after the manual control was thrown, the bubble materialized in the observation room. It was de-energized before anyone noticed what was inside. We tried to stop him but he drove the cart out into the hall, bowling us out of the way. The horses were in a panic.”

“What kind of cart was it?”

“There was some kind of sign on it. Painted in black letters on both sides. No one saw what it was.”

“Go ahead. What happened then?”

“Somebody fired a Slem-ray after him, but it missed. The horses carried him out of the building and onto the grounds. By the time we reached the exit the cart was halfway to the park.”

Reinhart reflected. “If he’s still in the park we should have him shortly. But we must be careful.” He was already starting back toward his ship, leaving Fredman behind. Harper fell in beside him.

Reinhart halted by his ship. He beckoned some Government guards over.

“Put the executive staff of this department under arrest. I’ll have them tried on a treason count, later on.” He smiled ironically as Harper’s face blanched sickly pale. “There’s a war going on. You’ll be lucky if you get off alive.”

Reinhart entered his ship and left the surface, rising rapidly into the sky. A second ship followed after him, a military escort. Reinhart flew high above the sea of gray slag, the unrecovered waste area. He passed over a sudden square of green set in the ocean of gray. Reinhart gazed back at it until it was gone.

Central Park. He could see police ships racing through the sky, ships and transports loaded with troops, heading toward the square of green. On the ground some heavy guns and surface cars rumbled along, lines of black approaching the park from all sides.

They would have the man soon. But meanwhile, the SRB machines were blank. And on the SRB machines' readings the whole war depended.

About noon the cart reached the edge of the park. Cole rested for a moment, allowing the horses time to crop at the thick grass. The silent expanse of slag amazed him. What had happened? Nothing stirred. No buildings, no sign of life. Grass and weeds poked up occasionally through it, breaking the flat surface here and there, but even so, the sight gave him an uneasy chill.

Cole drove the cart slowly out onto the slag, studying the sky above him. There was nothing to hide him, now that he was out of the park. The slag was bare and uniform, like the ocean. If he were spotted —

A horde of tiny black dots raced across the sky, coming rapidly closer. Presently they veered to the right and disappeared. More planes, wingless metal planes. He watched them go, driving slowly on.

Half an hour later something appeared ahead. Cole slowed the cart down, peering to see. The slag came to an end. He had reached its limits. Ground appeared, dark soil and grass. Weeds grew everywhere. Ahead of him, beyond the end of the slag, was a line of buildings, houses of some sort. Or sheds.

Houses, probably. But not like any he had ever seen.

The houses were uniform, all exactly the same. Like little green shells, rows of them, several hundred. There was a little lawn in front of each. Lawn, a path, a front porch, bushes in a meager row around each house. But the houses were all alike and very small.

Little green shells in precise, even rows. He urged the cart cautiously forward, toward the houses.

No one seemed to be around. He entered a street between two rows of houses, the hoofs of his two horses sounding loudly in the silence. He was in some kind of town. But there were no dogs or children. Everything was neat and silent. Like a model. An exhibit. It made him uncomfortable.

A young man walking along the pavement gaped at him in wonder. An oddly-dressed youth, in a toga-like cloak that hung down to his knees. A single piece of fabric. And sandals.

Or what looked like sandals. Both the cloak and the sandals were of some strange half-luminous material. It glowed faintly in the sunlight. Metallic, rather than cloth.

A woman was watering flowers at the edge of a lawn. She straightened up as his team of horses came near. Her eyes widened in astonishment — and then fear. Her mouth fell open in a soundless *O* and her sprinkling can slipped from her fingers and rolled silently onto the lawn.

Cole blushed and turned his head quickly away. The woman was scarcely dressed! He flicked the reins and urged the horses to hurry.

Behind him, the woman still stood. He stole a brief, hasty look back — and then shouted hoarsely to his team, ears scarlet. He had seen right. She wore only a pair of translucent shorts. Nothing else. A mere fragment of the same half-luminous material that glowed and sparkled. The rest of her small body was utterly naked.

He slowed the team down. She had been pretty. Brown hair and eyes, deep red lips. Quite a good figure. Slender waist, downy legs, bare and supple, full breasts — He clamped the thought furiously off. He had to get to work. Business.

Cole halted the Fixit cart and leaped down onto the pavement. He selected a house at random and approached it cautiously. The house was attractive. It had a certain simple beauty. But it looked frail — and exactly like the others.

He stepped up on the porch. There was no bell. He searched for it, running his hand uneasily over the surface of the door. All at once there was a click, a sharp snap on a level with his eyes. Cole glanced up, startled. A lens was vanishing as the door section slid over it. He had been photographed.

While he was wondering what it meant, the door swung suddenly open. A man filled up the entrance, a big man in a tan uniform, blocking the way ominously.

"What do you want?" the man demanded.

"I'm looking for work," Cole murmured. "Any kind of work. I can do anything, fix any kind of thing. I repair broken objects. Things that need mending." His voice trailed off uncertainly. "Anything at all."

"Apply to the Placement Department of the Federal Activities Control Board," the man said crisply. "You know all occupational therapy is handled through them." He eyed Cole curiously. "Why have you got on those ancient clothes?"

"Ancient? Why, I —"

The man gazed past him at the Fixit cart and the two dozing horses. "What's that? What are those two animals? *Horses?"* The man rubbed his jaw, studying Cole intently. "That's strange," he said.

"Strange?" Cole murmured uneasily. "Why?"

“There haven’t been any horses for over a century. All the horses were wiped out during the Fifth Atomic War. That’s why it’s strange.”

Cole tensed, suddenly alert. There was something in the man’s eyes, a hardness, a piercing look. Cole moved back off the porch, onto the path. He had to be careful. Something was wrong.

“I’ll be going,” he murmured.

“There haven’t been any horses for over a hundred years.” The man came toward Cole. “Who are you? Why are you dressed up like that? Where did you get that vehicle and pair of horses?”

“I’ll be going,” Cole repeated, moving away.

The man whipped something from his belt, a thin metal tube. He stuck it toward Cole.

It was a rolled-up paper, a thin sheet of metal in the form of a tube. Words, some kind of script. He could not make any of them out. The man’s picture, rows of numbers, figures —

“I’m Director Winslow,” the man said. “Federal Stockpile Conservation. You better talk fast, or there’ll be a Security car here in five minutes.”

Cole moved — fast. He raced, head down, back along the path to the cart, toward the street.

Something hit him. A wall of force, throwing him down on his face. He sprawled in a heap, numb and dazed. His body ached, vibrating wildly, out of control. Waves of shock rolled over him, gradually diminishing.

He got shakily to his feet. His head spun. He was weak, shattered, trembling violently. The man was coming down the walk after him. Cole pulled himself onto the cart, gasping and retching. The horses jumped into

life. Cole rolled over against the seat, sick with the motion of the swaying cart.

He caught hold of the reins and managed to drag himself up in a sitting position. The cart gained speed, turning a corner. Houses flew past. Cole urged the team weakly, drawing great shuddering breaths. Houses and streets, a blur of motion, as the cart flew faster and faster along.

Then he was leaving the town, leaving the neat little houses behind. He was on some sort of highway. Big buildings, factories, on both sides of the highway. Figures, men watching in astonishment.

After a while the factories fell behind. Cole slowed the team down. What had the man meant? Fifth Atomic War. Horses destroyed. It didn't make sense. And they had things he knew nothing about. Force fields. Planes without wings — soundless.

Cole reached around in his pockets. He found the identification tube the man had handed him. In the excitement he had carried it off. He unrolled the tube slowly and began to study it. The writing was strange to him.

For a long time he studied the tube. Then, gradually, he became aware of something. Something in the top right-hand corner.

A date. October 6, 2128.

Cole's vision blurred. Everything spun and wavered around him. October, 2128. Could it be?

But he held the paper in his hand. Thin, metal paper. Like foil. And it had to be. It said so, right in the corner, printed on the paper itself.

Cole rolled the tube up slowly, numbed with shock. Two hundred years. It didn't seem possible. But things were beginning to make sense. He was in the future, two hundred years in the future.

While he was mulling this over, the swift black Security ship appeared overhead, diving rapidly toward the horse-drawn cart, as it moved slowly along the road.

Reinhart's vidscreen buzzed. He snapped it quickly on. "Yes?"

"Report from Security."

"Put it through." Reinhart waited tensely as the lines locked in place. The screen re-lit.

"This is Dixon. Western Regional Command." The officer cleared his throat, shuffling his message plates. "The man from the past has been reported, moving away from the New York area."

"Which side of your net?"

"Outside. He evaded the net around Central Park by entering one of the small towns at the rim of the slag area."

"Evaded?"

"We assumed he would avoid the towns. Naturally the net failed to encompass any of the towns."

Reinhart's jaw stiffened. "Go on."

"He entered the town of Petersville a few minutes before the net closed around the park. We burned the park level, but naturally found nothing. He had already gone. An hour later we received a report from a resident in Petersville, an official of the Stockpile Conservation Department. The man from the past had come to his door, looking for work. Winslow, the official, engaged him in conversation, trying to hold onto him, but he escaped,

driving his cart off. Winslow called Security right away, but by then it was too late."

"Report to me as soon as anything more comes in. We must have him — and damn soon." Reinhart snapped the screen off. It died quickly.

He sat back in his chair, waiting.

Cole saw the shadow of the Security ship. He reacted at once. A second after the shadow passed over him, Cole was out of the cart, running and falling. He rolled, twisting and turning, pulling his body as far away from the cart as possible.

There was a blinding roar and flash of white light. A hot wind rolled over Cole, picking him up and tossing him like a leaf. He shut his eyes, letting his body relax. He bounced, falling and striking the ground. Gravel and stones tore into his face, his knees, the palms of his hands.

Cole cried out, shrieking in pain. His body was on fire. He was being consumed, incinerated by the blinding white orb of fire. The orb expanded, growing in size, swelling like some monstrous sun, twisted and bloated. The end had come. There was no hope. He gritted his teeth —

The greedy orb faded, dying down. It sputtered and winked out, blackening into ash. The air reeked, a bitter acrid smell. His clothes were burning and smoking. The ground under him was hot, baked dry, seared by the blast. But he was alive. At least, for a while.

Cole opened his eyes slowly. The cart was gone. A great hole gaped where it had been, a shattered sore in the center of the highway. An ugly cloud hung above the hole, black and ominous. Far above, the wingless plane circled, watching for any signs of life.

Cole lay, breathing shallowly, slowly. Time passed. The sun moved across the sky with agonizing slowness. It was perhaps four in the afternoon. Cole calculated mentally. In three hours it would be dark. If he could stay alive until then —

Had the plane seen him leap from the cart?

He lay without moving. The late afternoon sun beat down on him. He felt sick, nauseated and feverish. His mouth was dry.

Some ants ran over his outstretched hand. Gradually, the immense black cloud was beginning to drift away, dispersing into a formless blob.

The cart was gone. The thought lashed against him, pounding at his brain, mixing with his labored pulsebeat. *Gone.* Destroyed. Nothing but ashes and debris remained. The realization dazed him.

Finally the plane finished its circling, winging its way toward the horizon. At last it vanished. The sky was clear.

Cole got unsteadily to his feet. He wiped his face shakily. His body ached and trembled. He spat a couple of times, trying to clear his mouth. The plane would probably send in a report. People would be coming to look for him. Where could he go?

To his right a line of hills rose up, a distant green mass. Maybe he could reach them. He began to walk slowly. He had to be very careful. They were looking for him — and they had weapons. Incredible weapons.

He would be lucky to still be alive when the sun set. His team and Fixit cart were gone — and all his tools. Cole reached into his pockets, searching through them hopefully. He brought out some small screwdrivers, a little pair of cutting pliers, some wire, some solder, the whetstone, and finally the lady’s knife.

Only a few small tools remained. He had lost everything else. But without the cart he was safer, harder to spot. They would have more trouble finding him, on foot.

Cole hurried along, crossing the level fields toward the distant range of hills.

The call came through to Reinhart almost at once. Dixon's features formed on the vidscreen. "I have a further report, Commissioner." Dixon scanned the plate. "Good news. The man from the past was sighted moving away from Petersville, along highway 13, at about ten miles an hour, on his horse-drawn cart. Our ship bombed him immediately."

"Did — did you get him?"

"The pilot reports no sign of life after the blast."

Reinhart's pulse almost stopped. He sank back in his chair. "Then he's dead!"

"Actually, we won't know for certain until we can examine the debris. A surface car is speeding toward the spot. We should have the complete report in a short time. We'll notify you as soon as the information comes in."

Reinhart reached out and cut the screen. It faded into darkness. Had they got the man from the past? Or had he escaped again? Weren't they ever going to get him? Couldn't he be captured? And meanwhile, the SRB machines were silent, showing nothing at all.

Reinhart sat brooding, waiting impatiently for the report of the surface car to come.

It was evening.

"Come on!" Steven shouted, running frantically after his brother. "Come on back!"

“Catch me.” Earl ran and ran, down the side of the hill, over behind a military storage depot, along a neotex fence, jumping finally down into Mrs. Morris’ back yard.

Steven hurried after his brother, sobbing for breath, shouting and gasping as he ran. “Come back! You come back with that!”

“What’s he got?” Sally Tate demanded, stepping out suddenly to block Steven’s way.

Steven halted, his chest rising and falling. “He’s got my inter-system vidsender.” His small face twisted with rage and misery. “He better give it back!”

Earl came circling around from the right. In the warm gloom of evening he was almost invisible. “Here I am,” he announced. “What are you going to do?”

Steven glared at him hotly. His eyes made out the square box in Earl’s hands. “You give that back! Or — or I’ll tell Dad.”

Earl laughed. “Make me.”

“Dad’ll make you.”

“You better give it to him,” Sally said.

“Catch me.” Earl started off. Steven pushed Sally out of the way, lashing wildly at his brother. He collided with him, throwing him sprawling. The box fell from Earl’s hands. It skidded to the pavement, crashing into the side of a guide-light post.

Earl and Steven picked themselves up slowly. They gazed down at the broken box.

“See?” Steven shrilled, tears filling his eyes. “See what you did?”

“You did it. You pushed into me.”

“You did it!” Steven bent down and picked up the box. He carried it over to the guide-light, sitting down on the curb to examine it.

Earl came slowly over. “If you hadn’t pushed me it wouldn’t have got broken.”

Night was descending rapidly. The line of hills rising above the town were already lost in darkness. A few lights had come on here and there. The evening was warm. A surface car slammed its doors, some place off in the distance. In the sky ships droned back and forth, weary commuters coming home from work in the big underground factory units.

Thomas Cole came slowly toward the three children grouped around the guide-light. He moved with difficulty, his body sore and bent with fatigue. Night had come, but he was not safe yet.

He was tired, exhausted and hungry. He had walked a long way. And he had to have something to eat — soon.

A few feet from the children Cole stopped. They were all intent and absorbed by the box on Steven’s knees. Suddenly a hush fell over the children. Earl looked up slowly.

In the dim light the big stooped figure of Thomas Cole seemed extra menacing. His long arms hung down loosely at his sides. His face was lost in shadow. His body was shapeless, indistinct. A big unformed statue, standing silently a few feet away, unmoving in the half-darkness.

“Who are you?” Earl demanded, his voice low.

“What do you want?” Sally said. The children edged away nervously. “Get away.”

Cole came toward them. He bent down a little. The beam from the guide-light crossed his features. Lean, prominent nose, beak-like, faded blue eyes — Steven scrambled to his feet, clutching the vidsender box. “You get out of here!”

“Wait.” Cole smiled crookedly at them. His voice was dry and raspy. “What do you have there?” He pointed with his long, slender fingers. “The box you’re holding.”

The children were silent. Finally Steven stirred. “It’s my inter-system vidsender.”

“Only it doesn’t work,” Sally said.

“Earl broke it.” Steven glared at his brother bitterly. “Earl threw it down and broke it.”

Cole smiled a little. He sank down wearily on the edge of the curb, sighing with relief. He had been walking too long. His body ached with fatigue. He was hungry and tired. For a long time he sat, wiping perspiration from his neck and face, too exhausted to speak.

“Who are you?” Sally demanded, at last. “Why do you have on those funny clothes? Where did you come from?”

“Where?” Cole looked around at the children. “From a long way off. A long way.” He shook his head slowly from side to side, trying to clear it.

“What’s your therapy?” Earl said.

“My therapy?”

“What do you do? Where do you work?”

Cole took a deep breath and let it out again slowly. “I fix things. All kinds of things. Any kind.”

Earl sneered. “Nobody fixes things. When they break you throw them away.”

Cole didn’t hear him. Sudden need had roused him, getting him suddenly to his feet. “You know any work I can find?” he demanded. “Things I could do? I can fix anything. Clocks, typewriters, refrigerators, pots and pans. Leaks in the roof. I can fix anything there is.”

Steven held out his inter-system vidsender. “Fix this.”

There was silence. Slowly, Cole’s eyes focused on the box. “That?”

“My sender. Earl broke it.”

Cole took the box slowly. He turned it over, holding it up to the light. He frowned, concentrating on it. His long, slender fingers moved carefully over the surface, exploring it.

“He’ll steal it!” Earl said suddenly.

“No.” Cole shook his head vaguely. “I’m reliable.” His sensitive fingers found the studs that held the box together. He depressed the studs, pushing them expertly in. The box opened, revealing its complex interior.

“He got it open,” Sally whispered.

“Give it back!” Steven demanded, a little frightened. He held out his hand. “I want it back.”

The three children watched Cole apprehensively. Cole fumbled in his pocket. Slowly he brought out his tiny screwdrivers and pliers. He laid them in a row beside him. He made no move to return the box.

“I want it back,” Steven said feebly.

Cole looked up. His faded blue eyes took in the sight of the three children standing before him in the gloom. “I’ll fix it for you. You said you wanted it fixed.”

“I want it back.” Steven stood on one foot, then the other, torn by doubt and indecision. “Can you really fix it? Can you make it work again?”

“Yes.”

“All right. Fix it for me, then.”

A sly smile flickered across Cole’s tired face. “Now, wait a minute. If I fix it, will you bring me something to eat? I’m not fixing it for nothing.”

“Something to eat?”

“Food. I need hot food. Maybe some coffee.”

Steven nodded. “Yes. I’ll get it for you.”

Cole relaxed. “Fine. That’s fine.” He turned his attention back to the box resting between his knees. “Then I’ll fix it for you. I’ll fix it for you good.”

His fingers flew, working and twisting, tracing down wires and relays, exploring and examining. Finding out about the inter-system vidsender. Discovering how it worked.

Steven slipped into the house through the emergency door. He made his way to the kitchen with great care, walking on tip-toe. He punched the kitchen controls at random, his heart beating excitedly. The stove began to whirr, purring into life. Meter readings came on, crossing toward the completion marks.

Presently the stove opened, sliding out a tray of steaming dishes. The mechanism clicked off, dying into silence. Steven grabbed up the contents of the tray, filling his arms. He carried everything down the hall, out the emergency door and into the yard. The yard was dark. Steven felt his way carefully along.

He managed to reach the guide-light without dropping anything at all.

Thomas Cole got slowly to his feet as Steven came into view. “Here,” Steven said. He dumped the food onto the curb, gasping for breath. “Here’s the food. Is it finished?”

Cole held out the inter-system vidsender. “It’s finished. It was pretty badly smashed.”

Earl and Sally gazed up, wide-eyed. “Does it work?” Sally asked.

“Of course not,” Earl stated. “How could it work? He couldn’t —”

“Turn it on!” Sally nudged Steven eagerly. “See if it works.”

Steven was holding the box under the light, examining the switches. He flicked the main switch on. The indicator light gleamed. “It lights up,” Steven said.

“Say something into it.”

Steven spoke into the box. “Hello! Hello! This is operator 6-Z75 calling. Can you hear me? This is operator 6-Z75. Can you hear me?”

In the darkness, away from the beam of the guide-light, Thomas Cole sat crouched over the food. He ate gratefully, silently. It was good food, well cooked and seasoned. He drank a container of orange juice and then a sweet drink he didn't recognize. Most of the food was strange to him, but he didn't care. He had walked a long way and he still had a long way to go, before morning. He had to be deep in the hills before the sun came up. Instinct told him that he would be safe among the trees and tangled growth — at least, as safe as he could hope for.

He ate rapidly, intent on the food. He did not look up until he was finished. Then he got slowly to his feet, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand.

The three children were standing around in a circle, operating the inter-system vidsender. He watched them for a few minutes. None of them looked up from the small box. They were intent, absorbed in what they were doing.

"Well?" Cole said, at last. "Does it work all right?"

After a moment Steven looked up at him. There was a strange expression on his face. He nodded slowly. "Yes. Yes, it works. It works fine."

Cole grunted. "All right." He turned and moved away from the light. "That's fine."

The children watched silently until the figure of Thomas Cole had completely disappeared. Slowly, they turned and looked at each other. Then down at the box in Steven's hands. They gazed at the box in growing awe. Awe mixed with dawning fear.

Steven turned and edged toward his house. "I've got to show it to my Dad," he murmured, dazed. "He's got to know. *Somebody's* got to know!"

III

Eric Reinhart examined the vidsender box carefully, turning it around and around.

“Then he did escape from the blast,” Dixon admitted reluctantly. “He must have leaped from the cart just before the concussion.”

Reinhart nodded. “He escaped. He got away from you — twice.” He pushed the vidsender box away and leaned abruptly toward the man standing uneasily in front of his desk. “What’s your name again?”

“Elliot. Richard Elliot.”

“And your son’s name?”

“Steven.”

“It was last night this happened?”

“About eight o’clock.”

“Go on.”

“Steven came into the house. He acted queerly. He was carrying his inter-system vidsender.” Elliot pointed at the box on Reinhart’s desk. “That. He was nervous and excited. I asked what was wrong. For a while he couldn’t tell me. He was quite upset. Then he showed me the vidsender.” Elliot took a deep, shaky breath. “I could see right away it was different. You see I’m an electrical engineer. I had opened it once before, to put in a new battery. I had a fairly good idea how it should look.” Elliot hesitated. “Commissioner, it had been *changed.* A lot of the wiring was different.

Moved around. Relays connected differently. Some parts were missing. New parts had been jury rigged out of old. Then I discovered the thing that made me call Security. The vidsender — it really *worked!"*

"Worked?"

"You see, it never was anything more than a toy. With a range of a few city blocks. So the kids could call back and forth from their rooms. Like a sort of portable vidscreen. Commissioner, I tried out the vidsender, pushing the call button and speaking into the microphone. I — I got a ship of the line. A battleship operating beyond Proxima Centaurus — over eight light years away. As far out as the actual vidsenders operate. Then I called Security. Right away."

For a time Reinhart was silent. Finally he tapped the box lying on the desk. "You got a ship of the line — with *this?"*

"That's right."

"How big are the regular vidsenders?"

Dixon supplied the information. "As big as a twenty-ton safe."

"That's what I thought." Reinhart waved his hand impatiently. "All right, Elliot. Thanks for turning the information over to us. That's all."

Security police led Elliot outside the office.

Reinhart and Dixon looked at each other. "This is bad," Reinhart said harshly. "He has some ability, some kind of mechanical ability. Genius, perhaps, to do a thing like this. Look at the period he came from, Dixon. The early part of the twentieth century. Before the wars began. That was a unique period. There was a certain vitality, a certain ability. It was a period of incredible growth and discovery. Edison. Pasteur. Burbank. The Wright

brothers. Inventions and machines. People had an uncanny ability with machines. A kind of intuition about machines — which we don't have."

"You mean —"

"I mean a person like this coming into our own time is bad in itself, war or no war. He's too different. He's oriented along different lines. He has abilities we lack. This fixing skill of his. It throws us off, out of kilter. And with the war… .

"Now I'm beginning to understand why the SRB machines couldn't factor him. It's impossible for us to understand this kind of person. Winslow says he asked for work, any kind of work. The man said he could do anything, fix anything. Do you understand what that means?"

"No," Dixon said. "What does it mean?"

"Can any of us fix anything? No. None of us can do that. We're specialized. Each of us has his own line, his own work. I understand my work, you understand yours. The tendency in evolution is toward greater and greater specialization. Man's society is an ecology that forces adaptation to it. Continual complexity makes it impossible for any of us to know anything outside our own personal field — I can't follow the work of the man sitting at the next desk over from me. Too much knowledge has piled up in each field. And there are too many fields.

"This man is different. He can fix anything, do anything. He doesn't work with knowledge, with science — the classified accumulation of facts. He *knows* nothing. It's not in his head, a form of learning. He works by intuition — his power is in his hands, not his head. Jack-of-all-trades. His hands! Like a painter, an artist. In his hands — and he cuts across our lives like a knife-blade."

"And the other problem?"

“The other problem is that this man, this variable man, has escaped into the Albertine Mountain Range. Now we’ll have one hell of a time finding him. He’s clever — in a strange kind of way. Like some sort of animal. He’s going to be hard to catch.”

Reinhart sent Dixon out. After a moment he gathered up the handful of reports on his desk and carried them up to the SRB room. The SRB room was closed up, sealed off by a ring of armed Security police. Standing angrily before the ring of police was Peter Sherikov, his beard waggling angrily, his immense hands on his hips.

“What’s going on?” Sherikov demanded. “Why can’t I go in and peep at the odds?”

“Sorry.” Reinhart cleared the police aside. “Come inside with me. I’ll explain.” The doors opened for them and they entered. Behind them the doors shut and the ring of police formed outside. “What brings you away from your lab?” Reinhart asked.

Sherikov shrugged. “Several things. I wanted to see you. I called you on the vidphone and they said you weren’t available. I thought maybe something had happened. What’s up?”

“I’ll tell you in a few minutes.” Reinhart called Kaplan over. “Here are some new items. Feed them in right away. I want to see if the machines can total them.”

“Certainly, Commissioner.” Kaplan took the message plates and placed them on an intake belt. The machines hummed into life.

“We’ll know soon,” Reinhart said, half aloud.

Sherikov shot him a keen glance. “We’ll know what? Let me in on it. What’s taking place?”

“We’re in trouble. For twenty-four hours the machines haven’t given any reading at all. Nothing but a blank. A total blank.”

Sherikov’s features registered disbelief. “But that isn’t possible. *Some* odds exist at all times.”

“The odds exist, but the machines aren’t able to calculate them.”

“Why not?”

“Because a variable factor has been introduced. A factor which the machines can’t handle. They can’t make any predictions from it.”

“Can’t they reject it?” Sherikov said slyly. “Can’t they just — just *ignore* it?”

“No. It exists, as real data. Therefore it affects the balance of the material, the sum total of all other available data. To reject it would be to give a false reading. The machines can’t reject any data that’s known to be true.”

Sherikov pulled moodily at his black beard. “I would be interested in knowing what sort of factor the machines can’t handle. I thought they could take in all data pertaining to contemporary reality.”

“They can. This factor has nothing to do with contemporary reality. That’s the trouble. Histo-research in bringing its time bubble back from the past got overzealous and cut the circuit too quickly. The bubble came back loaded — with a man from the twentieth century. A man from the past.”

“I see. A man from two centuries ago.” The big Pole frowned. “And with a radically different Weltanschauung. No connection with our present society. Not integrated along our lines at all. Therefore the SRB machines are perplexed.”

Reinhart grinned. “Perplexed? I suppose so. In any case, they can’t do anything with the data about this man. The variable man. No statistics at all have been thrown up — no predictions have been made. And it knocks everything else out of phase. We’re dependent on the constant showing of these odds. The whole war effort is geared around them.”

“The horse-shoe nail. Remember the old poem? ‘For want of a nail the shoe was lost. For want of the shoe the horse was lost. For want of the horse the rider was lost. For want —’ “

“Exactly. A single factor coming along like this, one single individual, can throw everything off. It doesn’t seem possible that one person could knock an entire society out of balance — but apparently it is.”

“What are you doing about this man?”

“The Security police are organized in a mass search for him.”

“Results?”

“He escaped into the Albertine Mountain Range last night. It’ll be hard to find him. We must expect him to be loose for another forty-eight hours. It’ll take that long for us to arrange the annihilation of the range area. Perhaps a trifle longer. And meanwhile —”

“Ready, Commissioner,” Kaplan interrupted. “The new totals.”

The SRB machines had finished factoring the new data. Reinhart and Sherikov hurried to take their places before the view windows.

For a moment nothing happened. Then odds were put up, locking in place.

Sherikov gasped. 99-2. In favor of Terra. “That’s wonderful! Now we —”

The odds vanished. New odds took their places. 97-4. In favor of Centaurus. Sherikov groaned in astonished dismay. “Wait,” Reinhart said to him. “I don’t think they’ll last.”

The odds vanished. A rapid series of odds shot across the screen, a violent stream of numbers, changing almost instantly. At last the machines became silent.

Nothing showed. No odds. No totals at all. The view windows were blank.

“You see?” Reinhart murmured. “The same damn thing!”

Sherikov pondered. “Reinhart, you’re too Anglo-Saxon, too impulsive. Be more Slavic. This man will be captured and destroyed within two days. You said so yourself. Meanwhile, we’re all working night and day on the war effort. The warfleet is waiting near Proxima, taking up positions for the attack on the Centaurans. All our war plants are going full blast. By the time the attack date comes we’ll have a full-sized invasion army ready to take off for the long trip to the Centauran colonies. The whole Terran population has been mobilized. The eight supply planets are pouring in material. All this is going on day and night, even without odds showing. Long before the attack comes this man will certainly be dead, and the machines will be able to show odds again.”

Reinhart considered. “But it worries me, a man like that out in the open. Loose. A man who can’t be predicted. It goes against science. We’ve been making statistical reports on society for two centuries. We have immense files of data. The machines are able to predict what each person and group will do at a given time, in a given situation. But this man is beyond all prediction. He’s a variable. It’s contrary to science.”

“The indeterminate particle.”

“What’s that?”

“The particle that moves in such a way that we can’t predict what position it will occupy at a given second. Random. The random particle.”

“Exactly. It’s — it’s *unnatural!*”

Sherikov laughed sarcastically. “Don’t worry about it, Commissioner. The man will be captured and things will return to their natural state. You’ll be able to predict people again, like laboratory rats in a maze. By the way — why is this room guarded?”

“I don’t want anyone to know the machines show no totals. It’s dangerous to the war effort.”

“Margaret Duffe, for example?”

Reinhart nodded reluctantly. “They’re too timid, these parliamentarians. If they discover we have no SRB odds they’ll want to shut down the war planning and go back to waiting.”

“Too slow for you, Commissioner? Laws, debates, council meetings, discussions… . Saves a lot of time if one man has all the power. One man to tell people what to do, think for them, lead them around.”

Reinhart eyed the big Pole critically. “That reminds me. How is Icarus coming? Have you continued to make progress on the control turret?”

A scowl crossed Sherikov’s broad features. “The control turret?” He waved his big hand vaguely. “I would say it’s coming along all right. We’ll catch up in time.”

Instantly Reinhart became alert. “Catch up? You mean you’re still behind?”

“Somewhat. A little. But we’ll catch up.” Sherikov retreated toward the I door. “Let’s go down to the cafeteria and have a cup of coffee. You worry too much, Commissioner. Take things more in your stride.”

“I suppose you’re right.” The two men walked out into the hall. “I’m on edge. This variable man. I can’t get him out of my mind.”

“Has he done anything yet?”

“Nothing important. Rewired a child’s toy. A toy vidsender.”

“Oh?” Sherikov showed interest. “What do you mean? What did he do?”

“I’ll show you.” Reinhart led Sherikov down the hall to his office. They entered and Reinhart locked the door. He handed Sherikov the toy and roughed in what Cole had done. A strange look crossed Sherikov’s face. He found the studs on the box and depressed them. The box opened. The big Pole sat down at the desk and began to study the interior of the box. “You’re sure it was the man from the past who rewired this?”

“Of course. On the spot. The boy damaged it playing. The variable man came along and the boy asked him to fix it. He fixed it, all right.”

“Incredible.” Sherikov’s eyes were only an inch from the wiring. “Such tiny relays. How could he —”

“What?”

“Nothing.” Sherikov got abruptly to his feet, closing the box carefully. “Can I take this along? To my lab? I’d like to analyze it more fully.”

“Of course. But why?”

“No special reason. Let’s go get our coffee.” Sherikov headed toward thel door. “You say you expect to capture this man in a day or so?”

“Kill him, not capture him. We’ve got to eliminate him as a piece of data. We’re assembling the attack formations right now. No slip-ups, this time. We’re in the process of setting up a cross-bombing pattern to level the entire Albertine Range. He must be destroyed, within the next forty-eight hours.”

Sherikov nodded absently. “Of course,” he murmured. A preoccupied expression still remained on his broad features. “I understand perfectly.”

Thomas Cole crouched over the fire he had built, warming his hands. It was almost morning. The sky was turning violet gray. The mountain air was crisp and chilly. Cole shivered and pulled himself closer to the fire.

The heat felt good against his hands. *His hands*. He gazed down at them, glowing yellow-red in the firelight. The nails were black and chipped. Warts and endless calluses on each finger, and the palms. But they were good hands, the fingers were long and tapered. He respected them, although in some ways he didn’t understand them.

Cole was deep in thought, meditating over his situation.

He had been in the mountains two nights and a day. The first night had been the worst. Stumbling and falling, making his way uncertainly up the steep slopes, through the tangled brush and undergrowth —

But when the sun came up he was safe, deep in the mountains, between two great peaks. And by the time the sun had set again he had fixed himself a shelter and a means of making a fire. Now he had a neat little box trap, operated by a plaited grass rope and pit, a notched stake. One rabbit already hung by his hind legs and the trap was waiting for another.

The sky turned from violet gray to a deep cold gray, a metallic color. The mountains were silent and empty. Far off someplace a bird sang, its

voice echoing across the vast slopes and ravines. Other birds began to sing. Off to his right something crashed through the brush, an animal pushing its way along.

Day was coming. His second day. Cole got to his feet and began to unfasten the rabbit. Time to eat. And then? After that he had no plans. He knew instinctively that he could keep himself alive indefinitely with the tools he had retained, and the genius of his hands. He could kill game and skin it. Eventually he could build himself a permanent shelter, even make clothes out of hides. In winter —

But he was not thinking that far ahead. Cole stood by the fire, staring up at the sky, his hands on his hips. He squinted, suddenly tense. Something was moving. Something in the sky, drifting slowly through the grayness. A black dot.

He stamped out the fire quickly. What was it? He strained, trying to see. A bird?

A second dot joined the first. Two dots. Then three. Four. Five. A fleet of them, moving rapidly across the early morning sky. Toward the mountains.

Toward him.

Cole hurried away from the fire. He snatched up the rabbit and carried it along with him, into the tangled shelter he had built. He was invisible, inside the shelter. No one could find him. But if they had seen the fire —

He crouched in the shelter, watching the dots grow larger. They were planes, all right. Black wingless planes, coming closer each moment. Now he could hear them, a faint dull buzz, increasing until the ground shook under him.

The first plane dived. It dropped like a stone, swelling into a great black shape. Cole gasped, sinking down. The plane roared in an arch, swooping

low over the ground. Suddenly bundles tumbled out, white bundles falling and scattering like seeds.

The bundles drifted rapidly to the ground. They landed. They were men. Men in uniform.

Now the second plane was diving. It roared overhead, releasing its load.

More bundles tumbled out, rilling the sky. The third plane dived, then the fourth. The air was thick with drifting bundles of white, a blanket of descending weed spores, settling to earth.

On the ground the soldiers were forming into groups. Their shouts carried to Cole, crouched in his shelter. Fear leaped through him. They were landing on all sides of him. He was cut off. The last two planes had dropped men behind him.

He got to his feet, pushing out of the shelter. Some of the soldiers had found the fire, the ashes and coals. One dropped down, feeling the coals with his hand. He waved to the others. They were circling all around, shouting and gesturing. One of them began to set up some kind of gun. Others were unrolling coils of tubing, locking a collection of strange pipes and machinery in place.

Cole ran. He rolled down a slope, sliding and falling. At the bottom he leaped to his feet and plunged into the brush. Vines and leaves tore at his face, slashing and cutting him. He fell again, tangled in a mass of twisted shrubbery. He fought desperately, trying to free himself. If he could reach the knife in his pocket —

Voices. Footsteps. Men were behind him, running down the slope. Cole struggled frantically, gasping and twisting, trying to pull loose. He strained, breaking the vines, clawing at them with his hands.

A soldier dropped to his knee, leveling his gun. More soldiers arrived, bringing their rifles and aiming.

Cole cried out. He closed his eyes, his body suddenly went limp. He waited, his teeth locked together, sweat dripping down his neck, into his shirt, sagging against the mesh of vines and branches coiled around him.

Silence.

Cole opened his eyes slowly. The soldiers had regrouped. A huge man was striding down the slope toward them, barking orders as he came.

Two soldiers stepped into the brush. One of them grabbed Cole by the shoulder.

“Don’t let go of him.” The huge man came over, his black beard jutting out. “Hold on.”

Cole gasped for breath. He was caught. There was nothing he could do. More soldiers were pouring down into the gully, surrounding him on all sides. They studied him curiously, murmuring together. Cole shook his head wearily and said nothing.

The huge man with the beard stood directly in front of him, his hands on his hips, looking him up and down. “Don’t try to get away,” the man said. “You can’t get away. Do you understood?”

Cole nodded.

“All right. Good.” The man waved. Soldiers clamped metal bands around Cole’s arms and wrists. The metal dug into his flesh, making him gasp with pain. More clamps locked around his legs. “Those stay there until we’re out of here. A long way out.”

“Where — where are you taking me?”

Peter Sherikov studied the variable man for a moment before he answered. “Where? I’m taking you to my labs. Under the Urals.” He

glanced suddenly up at the sky. “We better hurry. The Security police will be starting their demolition attack in a few hours. We want to be a long way from here when that begins.”

Sherikov settled down in his comfortable reinforced chair with a sigh. “It’s good to be back.” He signaled to one of his guards. “All right. You can unfasten him.”

The metal clamps were removed from Cole’s arms and legs. He sagged, sinking down in a heap. Sherikov watched him silently.

Cole sat on the floor, rubbing his wrists and legs, saying nothing.

“What do you want?” Sherikov demanded. “Food? Are you hungry?”

“No.”

“Medicine? Are you sick? Injured?”

“No.”

Sherikov wrinkled his nose. “A bath wouldn’t hurt you any. We’ll arrange that later.” He lit a cigar, blowing a cloud of gray smoke around him. At the door of the room two lab guards stood with guns ready. No one else was in the room beside Sherikov and Cole.

Thomas Cole sat huddled in a heap on the floor, his head sunk down against his chest. He did not stir. His bent body seemed more elongated and stooped than ever, his hair tousled and unkempt, his chin and jowls a rough stubbled gray. His clothes were dirty and torn from crawling through the brush. His skin was cut and scratched; open sores dotted his neck and cheeks and forehead. He said nothing. His chest rose and fell. His faded blue eyes were almost closed. He looked quite old, a withered, dried-up old man.

Sherikov waved one of the guards over. “Have a doctor brought up here. I want this man checked over. He may need intravenous injections. He may not have had anything to eat for awhile.”

The guard departed.

“I don’t want anything to happen to you,” Sherikov said. “Before we go on I’ll have you checked over. And deloused at the same time.”

Cole said nothing.

Sherikov laughed. “Buck up! You have no reason to feel bad.” He leaned toward Cole, jabbing an immense finger at him. “Another two hours and you’d have been dead, out there in the mountains. You know that?”

Cole nodded.

“You don’t believe me. Look.” Sherikov leaned over and snapped on the vidscreen mounted in the wall. “Watch this. The operation should still be going on.”

The screen lit up. A scene gained form.

“This is a confidential Security channel. I had it tapped several years ago — for my own protection. What we’re seeing now is being piped in to Eric Reinhart.” Sherikov grinned. “Reinhart arranged what you’re seeing on the screen. Pay close attention. You were there, two hours ago.”

Cole turned toward the screen. At first he could not make out what was happening. The screen showed a vast foaming cloud, a vortex of motion. From the speaker came a low rumble, a deep-throated roar. After a time the screen shifted, showing a slightly different view. Suddenly Cole stiffened.

He was seeing the destruction of a whole mountain range.

The picture was coming from a ship, flying above what had once been the Albertine Mountain Range. Now there was nothing but swirling clouds of gray and columns of particles and debris, a surging tide of restless material gradually sweeping off and dissipating in all directions.

The Albertine Mountains had been disintegrated. Nothing remained but these vast clouds of debris. Below, on the ground, a ragged plain stretched out, swept by fire and rain. Gaping wounds yawned, immense holes without bottoms, craters side by side as far as the eye could see. Craters and debris. Like the blasted, pitted surface of the moon. Two hours ago it had been rolling peaks and gulleys, brush and green bushes and trees.

Cole turned away.

“You see?” Sherikov snapped the screen off. “You were down there, not so long ago. All that noise and smoke — all for you. All for you, Mr. Variable Man from the past. Reinhart arranged that, to finish you off. I want you to understand that. It’s very important that you realize that.”

Cole said nothing.

Sherikov reached into a drawer of the table before him. He carefully brought out a small square box and held it out to Cole. “You wired this, did you?”

Cole took the box in his hands and held it. For a time his tired mind fail to focus. What did he have? He concentrated on it. The box was the children’ toy. The inter-system vidsender, they had called it.

“Yes. I fixed this.” He passed it back to Sherikov. “I repaired that. It was broken.”

Sherikov gazed down at him intently, his large eyes bright. He nodded, his black beard and cigar rising and falling. “Good. That’s all I wanted to know.” He got suddenly to his feet, pushing his chair back. “I see the doctor’s here. He’ll fix you up. Everything you need. Later on I’ll talk to you again.”

Unprotesting, Cole got to his feet, allowing the doctor to take hold of his arm and help him up.

After Cole had been released by the medical department, Sherikov joined him in his private dining room, a floor above the actual laboratory.

The Pole gulped down a hasty meal, talking as he ate. Cole sat silently across from him, not eating or speaking. His old clothing had been taken away and new clothing given to him. He was shaved and rubbed down. His sores and cuts were healed, his body and hair washed. He looked much healthier and younger, now. But he was still stooped and tired, his blue eyes worn and faded. He listened to Sherikov’s account of the world of 2136 AD without comment.

“You can see,” Sherikov said finally, waving a chicken leg, “that your appearance here has been very upsetting to our program. Now that you know more about us you can see why Commissioner Reinhart was so interested in destroying you.”

Cole nodded.

“Reinhart, you realize, believes that the failure of the SRB machines is the chief danger to the war effort. But that is nothing!” Sherikov pushed his plate away noisily, draining his coffee mug. “After all, wars *can* be fought without statistical forecasts. The SRB machines only describe. They’re nothing more than mechanical onlookers. In themselves, they don’t affect the course of the war. *We* make the war. They only analyze.”

Cole nodded.

“More coffee?” Sherikov asked. He pushed the plastic container toward Cole. “Have some.”

Cole accepted another cupful. “Thank you.”

“You can see that our real problem is another thing entirely. The machines only do figuring for us in a few minutes that eventually we could do for our own selves. They’re our servants, tools. Not some sort of gods in a temple which we go and pray to. Not oracles who can see into the future for us. They don’t see into the future. They only make statistical predictions — not prophecies. There’s a big difference there, but Reinhart and his kind have made such things as the SRB machines into gods. But I have no gods. At least, not any I can see.”

Cole nodded, sipping his coffee.

“I’m telling you all these things because you must understand what we’re up against. Terra is hemmed in on all sides by the ancient Centauran Empire. It’s been out there for centuries, thousands of years. No one knows how long. It’s old — crumbling and rotting. Corrupt and venal. But it holds most of the galaxy around us, and we can’t break out of the Sol system. I told you about Icarus, and Hedge’s work in ftl flight. We must win the war against Centaurus. We’ve waited and worked a long time for this, the moment when we can break out and get room among the stars for ourselves. Icarus is the deciding weapon. The data on Icarus tipped the SRB odds in our favor — for the first time in history. Success in the war against Centaurus will depend on Icarus, not on the SRB machines. You see?”

Cole nodded.

“However, there is a problem. The data on Icarus which I turned over to the machines specified that Icarus would be completed in ten days. More than half that time has already passed. Yet, we are no closer to wiring up the control turret than we were then. The turret baffles us.” Sherikov grinned ironically. “Even *I* have tried my hand on the wiring, but with no success. It’s intricate — and small. Too many technical bugs not worked out. We are

building only once, you understand. If we had many experimental models worked out before —”

‘“But this is the experimental model,” Cole said.

“And built from the designs of a man dead four years — who isn’t here to correct us. We’ve made Icarus with our own hands down here in the labs. And he’s giving us plenty of trouble.” All at once Sherikov got to his feet. “Let’s go down to the lab and look at him.”

They descended to the floor below, Sherikov leading the way. Cole stopped short at the lab door.

“Quite a sight,” Sherikov agreed. “We keep him down here at the bottom for safety’s sake. He’s well protected. Come on in. We have work to do.”

In the center of the lab Icarus rose up, the gray squat cylinder that someday would flash through space at a speed of thousands of times that of light, toward the heart of Proxima Centaurus, over four light years away. Around the cylinder groups of men in uniform were laboring feverishly to finish the remaining work.

“Over here. The turret.” Sherikov led Cole over to one side of the room. “It’s guarded. Centauran spies are swarming everywhere on Terra. They see into everything. But so do we. That’s how we get information for the SRB machines. Spies in both systems.”

The translucent globe that was the control turret reposed in the center of a metal stand, an armed guard standing at each side. They lowered their guns as Sherikov approached.

“We don’t want anything to happen to this,” Sherikov said. “Everything depends on it.” He put out his hand for the globe. Halfway to it his hand stopped, striking against an invisible presence in the air.

Sherikov laughed. “The wall. Shut it off. It’s still on.”

One of the guards pressed a stud at his wrist. Around the globe the air shimmered and faded.

“Now.” Sherikov’s hand closed over the globe. He lifted it carefully from its mount and brought it out for Cole to see. “This is the control turret for our enormous friend here. This is what will slow him down when he’s inside Centaurus. He slows down and reenters this universe. Right in the heart of the star. Then — no more Centaurus.” Sherikov beamed. “And no more Armun.”

But Cole was not listening. He had taken the globe from Sherikov and was turning it over and over, running his hands over it, his face close to its surface. He peered down into its interior, his face rapt and intent.

“You can’t see the wiring. Not without lenses.” Sherikov signalled for a pair of micro-lenses to be brought. He fitted them on Cole’s nose, hooking them behind his ears. “Now try it. You can control the magnification. It’s set for 1000X right now. You can increase or decrease it.”

Cole gasped, swaying back and forth. Sherikov caught hold of him. Cole gazed down into the globe, moving his head slightly, focussing the glasses.

“It takes practice. But you can do a lot with them. Permits you to do microscopic wiring. There are tools to go along, you understand.” Sherikov paused, licking his lip. “We can’t get it done correctly. Only a few men can wire circuits using the micro-lenses and the little tools. We’ve tried robots, but there are too many decisions to be made. Robots can’t make decisions. They just react.”

Cole said nothing. He continued to gaze into the interior of the globe, his lips tight, his body taut and rigid. It made Sherikov feel strangely uneasy.

“You look like one of those old fortunetellers,” Sherikov said jokingly, but a cold shiver crawled up his spine. “Better hand it back to me.” He held out his hand.

Slowly, Cole returned the globe. After a time he removed the micro-lenses, still deep in thought.

“Well?” Sherikov demanded. “You know what I want. I want you to wire this damn thing up.” Sherikov came close to Cole, his big face hard. “You can do it, I think. I could tell by the way you held it — and the job you did on the children’s toy, of course. You could wire it up right, and in five days. Nobody else can. And if it’s not wired up Centaurus will keep on running the galaxy and Terra will have to sweat it out here in the Sol system. One tiny mediocre sun, one dust mote out of a whole galaxy.”

Cole did not answer.

Sherikov became impatient. “Well? What do you say?”

“What happens if I don’t wire this control for you? I mean, what happens to *me?”*

“Then I turn you over to Reinhart. Reinhart will kill you instantly. He thinks you’re dead, killed when the Albertine Range was annihilated. If he had any idea I had saved you —”

“I see.”

“I brought you down here for one thing. If you wire it up I’ll have you sent back to your own time continuum. If you don’t —”

Cole considered, his face dark and brooding.

“What do you have to lose? You’d already be dead, if we hadn’t pulled you out of those hills.”

“Can you really return me to my own time?”

“Of course!”

“Reinhart won’t interfere?”

Sherikov laughed. “What can he do? How can he stop me? I have my own men. You saw them. They landed all around you. You’ll be returned.”

“Yes. I saw your men.”

“Then you agree?”

“I agree,” Thomas Cole said. “I’ll wire it for you. I’ll complete the control turret-within the next five days.”

IV

Three days later Joseph Dixon slid a closed-circuit message plate across the desk to his boss.

"Here. You might be interested in this."

Reinhart picked the plate up slowly. "What is it? You came all the way here to show me this?"

"That's right."

"Why didn't you vidscreen it?"

Dixon smiled grimly. "You'll understand when you decode it. It's from Proxima Centaurus."

"Centaurus!"

"Our counter-intelligence service. They sent it direct to me. Here, I'll decode it for you. Save you the trouble."

Dixon came around behind Reinhart's desk. He leaned over the Commissioner's shoulder, taking hold of the plate and breaking the seal with his thumb nail.

"Hang on," Dixon said. "This is going to hit you hard. According to our agents on Armun, the Centauran High Council has called an emergency session to deal with the problem of Terra's impending attack. Centauran replay couriers have reported to the High Council that the Terran bomb Icarus is virtually complete. Work on the bomb has been rushed through

final stages in the underground laboratories under the Ural Range, directed by the Terran physicist Peter Sherikov."

"So I understand from Sherikov himself. Are you surprised the Centaurans know about the bomb? They have spies swarming over Terra. That's no news."

"There's more." Dixon traced the message plate grimly, with an unsteady finger. "The Centauran replay couriers reported that Peter Sherikov brought an expert mechanic out of a previous time continuum to complete the wiring of the turret!"

Reinhart staggered, holding on tight to the desk. He closed his eyes, gasping.

"The variable man is still alive," Dixon murmured. "I don't know how. Or why. There's nothing left of the Albertines. And how the hell did the man get halfway around the world?"

Reinhart opened his eyes slowly, his face twisting. "Sherikov! He must have removed him before the attack was forthcoming. I gave him the exact hour. He had to get help — from the variable man. He couldn't meet his promise otherwise."

Reinhart leaped up and began to pace back and forth. "I've already informed the SRB machines that the variable man has been destroyed. The machines now show the original 7-6 ratio in our favor. But the ratio is based on false information."

"Then you'll have to withdraw the false data and restore the original situation."

"No." Reinhart shook his head. "I can't do that. The machines must be kept functioning. We can't allow them to jam again. It's too dangerous. If Duffe should become aware that —"

“What are you going to do, then?” Dixon picked up the message plate. “You can’t leave the machines with false data. That’s treason.”

“The data can’t be withdrawn! Not unless equivalent data exists to take its place.” Reinhart paced angrily back and forth. “Damn it, I was *certain* the man was dead. This is an incredible situation. He must be eliminated — at any cost.”

Suddenly Reinhart stopped pacing. “The turret. It’s probably finished by this time. Correct?”

Dixon nodded slowly in agreement. “With the variable man helping, Sherikov has undoubtedly completed work well ahead of schedule.”

Reinhart’s gray eyes flickered. “Then he’s no longer of any use — even to Sherikov. We could take a chance… Even if there were active opposition…”

“What’s this?” Dixon demanded. “What are you thinking about?”

“How many units are ready for immediate action? How large a force can we raise without notice?”

“Because of the war we’re mobilized on a twenty-four hour basis. There are seventy air units and about two hundred surface units. The balance of the Security forces have been transferred to the line, under military control.”

“Men?”

“We have about five thousand men ready to go, still on Terra. Most of them in the process of being transferred to military transports. I can hold it up at any time.”

“Missiles?”

“Fortunately, the launching tubes have not yet been disassembled. They’re still here on Terra. In another few days they’ll be moving out for the Colonial fracas.”

“Then they’re available for immediate use?”

“Yes.”

“Good.” Reinhart locked his hands, knotting his fingers harshly together in sudden decision. “That will do exactly. Unless I am completely wrong, Sherikov has only a half-dozen air units and no surface cars. And only about two hundred men. Some defense shields, of course —”

“What are you planning?”

Reinhart’s face was gray and hard, like stone. “Send out orders for all available Security units to be unified under your immediate command. Have them ready to move by four o’clock this afternoon. We’re going to pay a visit,” Reinhart stated grimly. “A surprise visit. On Peter Sherikov.”

“Stop here,” Reinhart ordered.

The surface car slowed to a halt. Reinhart peered cautiously out, studying the horizon ahead.

On all sides a desert of scrub grass and sand stretched out. Nothing moved or stirred. To the right the grass and sand rose up to form immense peaks, a range of mountains without end, disappearing finally into the distance. The Urals.

“Over there,” Reinhart said to Dixon, pointing. “See?”

“No.”

“Look hard. It’s difficult to spot unless you know what to look for. Vertica pipes. Some kind of vent. Or periscopes.”

Dixon saw them finally. “I would have driven past without noticing.”

“It’s well concealed. The main labs are a mile down. Under the rang itself. It’s virtually impregnable. Sherikov had it built years ago, to withstand any attack. From the air, by surface cars, bombs, missiles —”

“He must feel safe down there.”

“No doubt.” Reinhart gazed up at the sky. A few faint black dots could be seen, moving lazily about, in broad circles. “Those aren’t ours, are they? I gave orders —”

“No. They’re not ours. All our units are out of sight. Those belong Sherikov. His patrol.”

Reinhart relaxed. “Good.” He reached over and flicked on the vidscreen over the board of the car. “This screen is shielded? It can’t be traced?”

“There’s no way they can spot it back to us. It’s nondirectional.”

The screen glowed into life. Reinhart punched the combination keys and sat back to wait.

After a time an image formed on the screen. A heavy face, bushy black beard and large eyes.

Peter Sherikov gazed at Reinhart with surprised curiosity. “Commissioner! Where are you calling from? What —”

“How’s the work progressing?” Reinhart broke in coldly. “Is Icarus almost complete?”

Sherikov beamed with expansive pride. “He’s done, Commissioner. Two days ahead of time. Icarus is ready to be launched into space. I tried to call your office, but they told me —”

“I’m not at my office.” Reinhart leaned toward the screen. “Open your entrance tunnel at the surface. You’re about to receive visitors.”

Sherikov blinked. “Visitors?”

“I’m coming down to see you. About Icarus. Have the tunnel opened for me at once.”

“Exactly where are you, Commissioner?”

“On the surface.”

Sherikov’s eyes flickered. “Oh? But —”

“Open up!” Reinhart snapped. He glanced at his wristwatch. “I’ll be at the entrance in five minutes. I expect to find it ready for me.”

“Of course.” Sherikov nodded in bewilderment. “I’m always glad to see you, Commissioner. But I —”

“Five minutes, then.” Reinhart cut the circuit. The screen died. He turned quickly to Dixon. “You stay up here, as we arranged. I’ll go down with one company of police. You understand the necessity of exact timing on this?”

“We won’t slip up. Everything’s ready. All units are in their places.”

“Good.” Reinhart pushed the door open for him. “You join your directional staff. I’ll proceed toward the entrance tunnel.”

“Good luck.” Dixon leaped out of the car, onto the sandy ground. A gust of dry air swirled into the car around Reinhart. “I’ll see you later.”

Reinhart slammed the door. He turned to the group of police crouched in the rear of the car, their guns held tightly. “Here we go,” Reinhart murmured. “Hold on.”

The car raced across the sandy ground, toward the entrance tunnel to Sherikov’s underground fortress.

Sherikov met Reinhart at the bottom end of the tunnel, where the tunnel opened up onto the main floor of the lab.

The big Pole approached, his hand out, beaming with pride and satisfaction. “It’s a pleasure to see you, Commissioner.”

Reinhart got out of the car, with his group of armed Security police. “Calls for a celebration, doesn’t it?” he said.

“That’s a good idea! We’re two days ahead, Commissioner. The SRB machines will be interested. The odds should change abruptly at the news.”

“Let’s go down to the lab. I want to see the control turret myself.”

A shadow crossed Sherikov’s face. “I’d rather not bother the workmen right now, Commissioner. They’ve been under a great load, trying to complete the turret in time. I believe they’re putting a few last finishes on it at this moment.”

“We can view them by vidscreen. I’m curious to see them at work. It must be difficult to wire such minute relays.”

Sherikov shook his head. “Sorry, Commissioner. No vidscreen on them. I won’t allow it. This is too important. Our whole future depends on it.”

Reinhart snapped a signal to his company of police. “Put this man under arrest.”

Sherikov blanched. His mouth fell open. The police moved quickly around him, their gun-tubes up, jabbing into him. He was searched rapidly, efficiently. His gun belt and concealed energy screen were yanked off.

“What’s going on?” Sherikov demanded, some color returning to his face. “What are you doing?”

“You’re under arrest for the duration of the war. You’re relieved of all authority. From now on one of my men will operate Designs. When the war is over you’ll be tried before the Council and President Duffe.”

Sherikov shook his head, dazed. “I don’t understand. What’s this all about? Explain it to me, Commissioner. What’s happened?”

Reinhart signalled to his police. “Get ready. We’re going into the lab. We may have to shoot our way in. The variable man should be in the area of the bomb, working on the control turret.”

Instantly Sherikov’s face hardened. His black eyes glittered, alert and hostile.

Reinhart laughed harshly. “We received a counter-intelligence report from Centaurus. I’m surprised at you, Sherikov. You know the Centaurans are everywhere with their relay couriers. You should have known —”

Sherikov moved. Fast. All at once he broke away from the police, throwing his massive body against them. They fell, scattering. Sherikov ran — directly at the wall. The police fired wildly. Reinhart fumbled frantically for his gun tube, pulling it up.

Sherikov reached the wall, running head down, energy beams flashing around him. He struck against the wall — and vanished.

"Down!" Reinhart shouted. He dropped to his hands and knees. All around him his police dived for the floor. Reinhart cursed wildly, dragging himself quickly toward the door. They had to get out, and right away. Sherikov had escaped. A false wall, an energy barrier set to respond to his pressure. He had dashed through it to safety. He —

From all sides an inferno burst, a flaming roar of death surging over them, around them, on every side. The room was alive with blazing masses of destruction, bouncing from wall to wall. They were caught between four banks of power, all of them open to full discharge. A trap — a death trap.

Reinhart reached the hall gasping for breath. He leaped to his feet. A few Security police followed him. Behind them, in the flaming room, the rest of the company screamed and struggled, blasted out of existence by the leaping bursts of power.

Reinhart assembled his remaining men. Already, Sherikov's guards were forming. At one end of the corridor a snub-barreled robot gun was maneuvering into position. A siren wailed. Guards were running on all sides, hurrying to battle stations.

The robot gun opened fire. Part of the corridor exploded, bursting into fragments. Clouds of choking debris and particles swept around them. Reinhart and his police retched, moving back along the corridor.

They reached a junction. A second robot gun was rumbling toward them, hurrying to get within range. Reinhart fired carefully, aiming at its delicate control. Abruptly the gun spun convulsively. It lashed against the wall, smashing itself into the unyielding metal. Then it collapsed in a heap, gears still whining and spinning.

"Come on." Reinhart moved away, crouching and running. He glanced at his watch. *Almost time.* A few more minutes. A group of lab guards

appeared ahead of them. Reinhart fired. Behind him his police fired past him, violet shafts of energy catching the group of guards as they entered the corridor. The guards spilled apart, falling and twisting. Part of them settled into dust, drifting down the corridor. Reinhart made his way toward the lab, crouching and leaping, pushing past heaps of debris and remains, followed by his men. “Come on! Don’t stop!”

Suddenly from around them the booming, enlarged voice of Sherikov thundered, magnified by rows of wall speakers along the corridor. Reinhart halted, glancing around.

“Reinhart! You haven’t got a chance. You’ll never get back to the surface. Throw down your guns and give up. You’re surrounded on all sides. You’re a mile under the surface.”

Reinhart threw himself into motion, pushing into billowing clouds of particles drifting along the corridor. “Are you sure, Sherikov?” he grunted.

Sherikov laughed, his harsh, metallic peals rolling in waves against Reinhart’s eardrums. “I don’t want to have to kill you, Commissioner. You’re vital to the war. I’m sorry you found out about the variable man. I admit we overlooked the Centauran espionage as a factor in this. But now that you know about him —”

Suddenly Sherikov’s voice broke off. A deep rumble had shaken the floor, a lapping vibration that shuddered through the corridor.

Reinhart sagged with relief. He peered through the clouds of debris, making out the figures on his watch. Right on time. Not a second late.

The first of the hydrogen missiles, launched from the Council buildings on the other side of the world, were beginning to arrive. The attack had begun.

At exactly six o’clock Joseph Dixon, standing on the surface four miles from the entrance tunnel, gave the sign to the waiting units.

The first job was to break down Sherikov’s defense screens. The missiles had to penetrate without interference. At Dixon’s signal a fleet of thirty Security ships dived from a height of ten miles, swooping above the mountains, directly over the underground laboratories. Within five minutes the defense screens had been smashed, and all the tower projectors leveled flat. Now the mountains were virtually unprotected.

“So far so good,” Dixon murmured, as he watched from his secure position. The fleet of Security ships roared back, their work done. Across the of the desert the police surface cars were crawling rapidly toward the entranc tunnel, snaking from side to side.

Meanwhile, Sherikov’s counter-attack had begun to go into operation.

Guns mounted among the hills opened fire. Vast columns of flames burs up in the path of the advancing cars. The cars hesitated and retreated, as the plain was churned up by a howling vortex, a thundering chaos of explosions. Here and there a car vanished in a cloud of particles. A group of cars moving away suddenly scattered, caught up by a giant wind that lashed across them and swept them up into the air.

Dixon gave orders to have the cannon silenced. The police air arm again swept overhead, a sullen roar of jets that shook the ground below. The police ships divided expertly and hurtled down on the cannon protecting the hills.

The cannon forgot the surface cars and lifted their snouts to meet the attack. Again and again the airships came, rocking the mountains with titanic blasts.

The guns became silent. Their echoing boom diminished, died away reluctantly, as bombs took critical toll of them.

Dixon watched with satisfaction as the bombing came to an end. The airships rose in a thick swarm, black gnats shooting up in triumph from a dead carcass. They hurried back as emergency anti-aircraft robot guns swung into position and saturated the sky with blazing puffs of energy.

Dixon checked his wristwatch. The missiles were already on the way fron North America. Only a few minutes remained.

The surface cars, freed by the successful bombing, began to regroup for a new frontal attack. Again they crawled forward, across the burning plain, bearing down cautiously on the battered wall of mountains, heading toward the twisted wrecks that had been the ring of defense guns. Toward the entrance tunnel.

An occasional cannon fired feebly at them. The cars came grimly on. Now, in the hollows of the hills, Sherikov's troops were hurrying to the surface to meet the attack. The first car reached the shadow of the mountains…

A deafening hail of fire burst loose. Small robot guns appeared everywhere, needle barrels emerging from behind hidden screens, trees, shrubs, rocks, and stones. The police cars were caught in a withering cross-fire, trapped at the base of the hills.

Down the slopes Sherikov's guards raced, toward the stalled cars. Clouds of heat rose up and boiled across the plain as the cars fired up at the running men. A robot gun dropped like a slug onto the plain and screamed toward the cars, firing as it came.

Dixon twisted nervously. Only a few minutes. Any time, now. He shaded his eyes and peered up at the sky. No sign of them yet. He wondered about Reinhart. No signal had come from below. Clearly, Reinhart had run into trouble. No doubt there was desperate fighting going on in the maze of underground tunnels, the intricate web of passages that honeycombed the earth below the mountains.

In the air, Sherikov’s few defense ships darted rapidly, wildly, putting up a futile fight.

Sherikov’s guards streamed out onto the plain. Crouching and running, they advanced toward the stalled cars. The police airships screeched down at them, guns thundering.

Dixon held his breath. When the missiles arrived —

The first missile struck. A section of the mountain vanished, turned to smoke and foaming gases. The wave of heat slapped Dixon across the face, spinning him around. Quickly he reentered his ship and took off, shooting rapidly away from the scene. He glanced back. A second and third missile had arrived. Great gaping pits yawned among the mountains, vast sections missing like broken teeth. Now the missiles could penetrate to the underground laboratories below.

On the ground, the surface cars halted beyond the danger area, waiting for the missile attack to finish. When the eighth missile had struck, the cars again moved forward. No more missiles fell.

Dixon swung his ship around, heading back toward the scene. The laboratory was exposed. The top sections of it had been ripped open. The laboratory lay like a tin can, torn apart by mighty explosions, its first floors visible from the air. Men and cars were pouring down into it, fighting with the guards swarming to the surface.

Dixon watched intently. Sherikov’s men were bringing up heavy guns, big robot artillery. But the police ships were diving again. Sherikov’s defensive patrols had been cleaned from the sky. The police ships whined down, arcing over the exposed laboratory. Small bombs fell, whistling down, pinpointing the artillery rising to the surface on the remaining lift stages.

Abruptly Dixon’s vidscreen clicked. Dixon turned toward it.

Reinhart's features formed. "Call off the attack." His uniform was torn. A deep bloody gash crossed his cheek. He grinned sourly at Dixon, pushing his tangled hair back out of his face. "Quite a fight."

"Sherikov —"

"He's called off his guards. We've agreed to a truce. It's all over. No more needed." Reinhart gasped for breath, wiping grime and sweat from his neck. "Land your ship and come down here at once."

"The variable man?"

"That comes next," Reinhart said grimly. He adjusted his gun tube. "I want you down here, for that part. I want you to be in on the kill."

Reinhart turned away from the vidscreen. In the corner of the room Sherikov stood silently, saying nothing. "Well?" Reinhart barked. "Where is he? Where will I find him?"

Sherikov licked his lips nervously, glancing up at Reinhart. "Commissioner, are you sure —"

"The attack has been called off. Your labs are safe. So is your life. Now it's your turn to come through." Reinhart gripped his gun, moving toward Sherikov. *"Where is he?"*

For a moment Sherikov hesitated. Then slowly his huge body sagged defeated. He shook his head wearily. "All right. I'll show you where he is." Hi voice was hardly audible, a dry whisper. "Down this way. Come on."

Reinhart followed Sherikov out of the room, into the corridor. Police and guards were working rapidly, clearing the debris and ruins away, putting out the hydrogen fires that burned everywhere. "No tricks, Sherikov."

“No tricks.” Sherikov nodded resignedly. “Thomas Cole is by himself. In a wing lab off the main rooms.”

“Cole?”

“The variable man. That’s his name.” The Pole turned his massive head a little. “He has a name.”

Reinhart waved his gun. “Hurry up. I don’t want anything to go wrong. This is the part I came for.”

“You must remember something, Commissioner.”

“What is it?”

Sherikov stopped walking. “Commissioner, nothing must happen to the globe. The control turret. Everything depends on it, the war, our whole —”

“I know. Nothing will happen to the damn thing. Let’s go.”

“If it should get damaged —”

“I’m not after the globe. I’m interested only in — in Thomas Cole.”

They came to the end of the corridor and stopped before a metal door. Sherikov nodded at the door. “In there.”

Reinhart moved back. “Open the door.”

“Open it yourself. I don’t want to have anything to do with it.”

Reinhart shrugged. He stepped up to the door. Holding his gun level he raised his hand, passing it in front of the eye circuit. Nothing happened.

Reinhart frowned. He pushed the door with his hand. The door slid open. Reinhart was looking into a small laboratory. He glimpsed a workbench, tools, heaps of equipment, measuring devices, and in the center of the bench the transparent globe, the control turret.

"Cole?" Reinhart advanced quickly into the room. He glanced around him, suddenly alarmed. "Where —"

The room was empty. Thomas Cole was gone.

When the first missile struck, Cole stopped work and sat listening.

Far off, a distant rumble rolled through the earth, shaking the floor under him. On the bench, tools and equipment danced up and down. A pair of pliers fell crashing to the floor. A box of screws tipped over, spilling its minute contents out.

Cole listened for a time. Presently he lifted the transparent globe from the bench. With carefully controlled hands he held the globe up, running his fingers gently over the surface, his faded blue eyes thoughtful. Then, after a time, he placed the globe back on the bench, in its mount.

The globe was finished. A faint glow of pride moved through the variable man. The globe was the finest job he had ever done.

The deep rumblings ceased. Cole became instantly alert. He jumped down from his stool, hurrying across the room to the door. For a moment he stood by the door listening intently. He could hear noise on the other side, shouts, guards rushing past, dragging heavy equipment, working frantically.

A rolling crash echoed down the corridor and lapped against his door. The concussion spun him around. Again a tide of energy shook the walls and floor and sent him down on his knees.

The lights flickered and winked out.

Cole fumbled in the dark until he found a flashlight. Power failure. He could hear crackling flames. Abruptly the lights came on again, an ugly yellow, then faded back out. Cole bent down and examined the door with his flashlight. A magnetic lock. Dependent on an externally induced electric flux. He grabbed a screwdriver and pried at the door. For a moment it held. Then it fell open.

Cole stepped warily out into the corridor. Everything was in shambles. Guards wandered everywhere, burned and half blinded. Two lay groaning under a pile of wrecked equipment. Fused guns, reeking metal. The air was heavy with the smell of burning wiring and plastic. A thick cloud that choked him and made him bend double as he advanced.

“Halt,” a guard gasped feebly, struggling to rise. Cole pushed past him and down the corridor. Two small robot guns, still functioning, glided past him hurriedly toward the drumming chaos of battle. He followed.

At a major intersection the fight was in full swing. Sherikov’s guards fought Security police, crouched behind pillars and barricades, firing wildly, desperately. Again the whole structure shuddered as a great booming blast ignited some place above. Bombs? Shells?

Cole threw himself down as a violet beam cut past his ear and disintegrated the wall behind him. A Security policeman, wild-eyed, firing erratically. One of Sherikov’s guards winged him and his gun skidded to the floor.

A robot cannon turned toward him as he made his way past the intersection. He began to run. The cannon rolled along behind him, aiming itself uncertainly. Cole hunched over as he shambled rapidly along, gasping for breath. In the flickering yellow light he saw a handful of Security police advancing, firing expertly, intent on a line of defense Sherikov’s guards had hastily set up.

The robot cannon altered its course to take them on, and Cole escaped around a corner.

He was in the main lab, the big chamber where Icarus himself rose, the vast squat column.

Icarus! A solid wall of guards surrounded him, grim-faced, hugging guns and protection shields. But the Security police were leaving Icarus alone. Nobody wanted to damage him. Cole evaded a lone guard tracking him and reached the far side of the lab.

It took him only a few seconds to find the force field generator. There was no switch. For a moment that puzzled him — and then he remembered. The guard had controlled it from his wrist.

Too late to worry about that. With his screwdriver he unfastened the plate over the generator and ripped out the wiring in handfuls. The generator came loose and he dragged it away from the wall. The screen was off, thank God. He managed to carry the generator into a side corridor.

Crouched in a heap, Cole bent over the generator, deft fingers flying. He pulled the wiring to him and laid it out on the floor, tracing the circuits with feverish haste.

The adaptation was easier than he had expected. The screen flowed at right angles to the wiring, for a distance of six feet. Each lead was shielded on one side; the field radiated outward, leaving a hollow cone in the center. He ran the wiring through his belt, down his trouser legs, under his shirt, all the way to his wrists and ankles.

He was just snatching up the heavy generator when two Security police appeared. They raised their blasters and fired point-blank.

Cole clicked on the screen. A vibration leaped through him that snapped his jaw and danced up his body. He staggered away, half-stupefied by the

surging force that radiated out from him. The violet rays struck the field and deflected harmlessly.

He was safe.

He hurried on down the corridor, past a ruined gun and sprawled bodies still clutching blasters. Great drifting clouds of radioactive particles billowed around him. He edged by one cloud nervously. Guards lay everywhere, dying and dead, partly destroyed, eaten and corroded by the hot metallic salts in the air. He had to get out — and fast.

At the end of the corridor a whole section of the fortress was in ruins. Towering flames leaped on all sides. One of the missiles had penetrated below ground level.

Cole found a lift that still functioned. A load of wounded guards was being raised to the surface. None of them paid any attention to him. Flames surged around the lift, licking at the wounded. Workmen were desperately trying to get the lift into action. Cole leaped onto the lift. A moment later it began to rise, leaving the shouts and the flames behind.

The lift emerged on the surface and Cole jumped off. A guard spotted him and gave chase. Crouching, Cole dodged into a tangled mass of twisted metal, still white-hot and smoking. He ran for a distance, leaping from the side of a ruined defense-screen tower, onto the fused ground and down the side of a hill. The ground was hot underfoot. He hurried as fast as he could, gasping for breath. He came to a long slope and scrambled up the side.

The guard who had followed was gone, lost behind in the rolling clouds of ash that drifted from the ruins of Sherikov’s underground fortress.

Cole reached the top of the hill. For a brief moment he halted to get his breath and figure where he was. It was almost evening. The sun was beginning to set. In the darkening sky a few dots still twisted and rolled, black specks that abruptly burst into flame and fused out again.

Cole stood up cautiously, peering around him. Ruins stretched out below, on all sides, the furnace from which he had escaped. A chaos of incandescent metal and debris, gutted and wrecked beyond repair. Miles of tangled rubbish and half-vaporized equipment.

He considered. Everyone was busy putting out the fires and pulling the wounded to safety. It would be a while before he was missed. But as soon as they realized he was gone they'd be after him. Most of the laboratory had been destroyed. Nothing lay back that way.

Beyond the ruins lay the great Ural peaks, the endless mountains, stretching out as far as the eye could see.

Mountains and green forests. A wilderness. They'd never find him there.

Cole started along the side of the hill, walking slowly and carefully, his screen generator under his arm. Probably in the confusion he could find enough food and equipment to last him indefinitely. He could wait until early morning then circle back toward the ruins and load up. With a few tools and his own innate skill he would get along fine. A screwdriver, hammer, nails, odds and ends —

A great hum sounded in his ears. It swelled to a deafening roar. Startled, Cole whirled around. A vast shape filled the sky behind him, growing each moment. Cole stood frozen, utterly transfixed. The shape thundered over him, above his head, as he stood stupidly, rooted to the spot.

Then, awkwardly, uncertainly, he began to run. He stumbled and fell and rolled a short distance down the side of the hill. Desperately, he struggled to hold onto the ground. His hands dug wildly, futilely, into the soft soil, trying to keep the generator under his arm at the same time.

A flash, and a blinding spark of light around him.

The spark picked him up and tossed him like a dry leaf. He grunted in agony as searing fire crackled about him, a blazing inferno that gnawed and ate hungrily through his screen. He spun dizzily and fell through the cloud of fire, down into a pit of darkness, a vast gulf between two hills. His wiring ripped off. The generator tore out of his grip and was lost behind. Abruptly, his force field ceased.

Cole lay in the darkness at the bottom of the hill. His whole body shrieked in agony as the unholy fire played over him. He was a blazing cinder, a half-consumed ash flaming in a universe of darkness. The pain made him twist and crawl like an insect, trying to burrow into the ground. He screamed and shrieked and struggled to escape, to get away from the hideous fire. To reach the curtain of darkness beyond, where it was cool and silent, where the flames couldn't crackle and eat at him.

He reached imploringly out, into the darkness, groping feebly toward it, trying to pull himself into it. Gradually, the glowing orb that was his own body faded. The impenetrable chaos of night descended. He allowed the tide to sweep over him, to extinguish the searing fire.

Dixon landed his ship expertly, bringing it to a halt in front of an overturned defense tower. He leaped out and hurried across the smoking ground.

From a lift Reinhart appeared, surrounded by his Security police. "He got away from us! He escaped!"

"He didn't escape," Dixon answered. "I got him myself."

Reinhart quivered violently. "What do you mean?"

"Come along with me. Over in this direction." He and Reinhart climbed the side of a demolished hill, both of them panting for breath. "I was landing. I saw a figure emerge from a lift and run toward the mountains,

like some sort of animal. When he came out in the open I dived on him and released a phosphorous bomb."

"Then he's — *dead!"*

"I don't see how anyone could have lived through a phosphorous bomb." They reached the top of the hill. Dixon halted, then pointed excitedly down into the pit beyond the hill. "There!"

They descended cautiously. The ground was singed and burned clean. Clouds of smoke hung heavily in the air. Occasional fires still flickered here and there. Reinhart coughed and bent over to see. Dixon flashed on a pocket flare and set it beside the body.

The body was charred, half destroyed by the burning phosphorous. It lay motionless, one arm over its face, mouth open, legs sprawled grotesquely.

Like some abandoned rag doll, tossed in an incinerator and consumed almost beyond recognition.

"He's alive!" Dixon muttered. He felt around curiously. "Must have had some kind of protection screen. Amazing that a man could —"

"It's him? It's really him?"

"Fits the description." Dixon tore away a handful of burned clothing. "This is the variable man. What's left of him, at least."

Reinhart sagged with relief. "Then we've finally got him. The data is accurate. He's no longer a factor."

Dixon got out his blaster and released the safety catch thoughtfully. "If you want, I can finish the job right now."

At that moment Sherikov appeared, accompanied by two armed Security police. He strode grimly down the hillside, black eyes snapping. “Did Cole —” He broke off. “Good God.”

“Dixon got him with a phosphorous bomb,” Reinhart said noncommittally. “He had reached the surface and was trying to get into the mountains.”

Sherikov turned wearily away. “He was an amazing person. During the attack he managed to force the lock on his door and escape. The guards fired at him, but nothing happened. He had rigged up some kind of force field around him. Something he adapted.”

“Anyhow, it’s over with,” Reinhart answered. “Did you have SRB plates made up on him?”

Sherikov reached slowly into his coat. He drew out a manila envelope. “Here’s all the information I collected about him, while he was with me.”

“Is it complete? Everything previous has been merely fragmentary.”

“As near complete as I could make it. It includes photographs and diagrams of the interior of the globe. The turret wiring he did for me. I haven’t had a chance even to look at them.” Sherikov fingered the envelope. “What are you going to do with Cole?”

“Have him loaded up, taken back to the city — and officially put to sleep by the Euthanasia Ministry.”

“Legal murder?” Sherikov’s lips twisted. “Why don’t you simply do it right here and get it over with?”

Reinhart grabbed the envelope and stuck it in his right pocket. “I’ll turn this right over to the machines.” He motioned to Dixon. “Let’s go. Now we

can notify the fleet to prepare for the attack on Centaurus." He turned briefly back to Sherikov. "When can Icarus be launched?"

"In an hour or so, I suppose. They're locking the control turret in place. Assuming it functions correctly, that's all that's needed."

"Good. I'll notify Duffe to send out the signal to the warfleet." Reinhart nodded to the police to take Sherikov to the waiting Security ship. Sherikov moved off dully, his face gray and haggard. Cole's inert body was picked up and tossed onto a freight cart. The cart rumbled into the hold of the Security ship and the lock slid shut after it.

"It'll be interesting to see how the machines respond to the additional data," Dixon said.

"It should make quite an improvement in the odds," Reinhart agreed. He patted the envelope bulging in his inside pocket. "We're two days ahead of time."

Margaret Duffe got up slowly from her desk. She pushed her chair automatically back. "Let me get all this straight. You mean the bomb is finished? Ready to go?"

Reinhart nodded impatiently. "That's what I said. The Technicians are checking the turret locks to make sure it's properly attached. The launching will take place in half an hour."

"Thirty minutes! Then —"

"Then the attack can begin at once. I assume the fleet is ready for action."

"Of course. It's been ready for several days. But I can't believe the bomb is ready so soon." Margaret Duffe moved numbly toward the door of her office. "This is a great day, Commissioner. An old era lies behind us.

This time tomorrow Centaurus will be gone. And eventually the colonies will be ours."

"It's been a long climb," Reinhart murmured.

"One thing. Your charge against Sherikov. It seems incredible that a person of his caliber could ever —"

"We'll discuss that later," Reinhart interrupted coldly. He pulled the manila envelope from his coat. "I haven't had an opportunity to feed the additional data to the SRB machines. If you'll excuse me, I'll do that now."

For a moment Margaret Duffe stood at the door. The two of them faced each other silently, neither speaking, a faint smile on Reinhart's thin lips, hostility in the woman's blue eyes.

"Reinhart, sometimes I think perhaps you'll go too far. And sometimes I think you've *already* gone too far…"

"I'll inform you of any change in the odds showing." Reinhart strode past her, out of the office and down the hall. He headed toward the SRB room, an intense thalamic excitement rising up inside him.

A few moments later he entered the SRB room. He made his way to the machines. The odds 7-6 showed in the view windows. Reinhart smiled a little. 7-6. False odds, based on incorrect information. Now they could be removed.

Kaplan hurried over. Reinhart handed him the envelope, and moved over to the window, gazing down at the scene below. Men and cars scurried frantically everywhere. Officials coming and going like ants, hurrying in all directions.

The war was on. The signal had been sent out to the warfleet that had waited so long near Proxima Centaurus. A feeling of triumph raced through Reinhart. He had won. He had destroyed the man from the past and broken Peter Sherikov. The war had begun as planned. Terra was breaking out. Reinhart smiled thinly. He had been completely successful. "Commissioner."

Reinhart turned slowly. "All right."

Kaplan was standing in front of the machines, gazing down at the reading. "Commissioner —"

Sudden alarm plucked at Reinhart. There was something in Kaplan's voice. He hurried quickly over. "What is it?"

Kaplan looked up at him, his face white, his eyes wide with terror. His mouth opened and closed, but no sound came.

"What is it?" Reinhart demanded, chilled. He bent toward the machines, studying the reading.

And sickened with horror. 100-1. *Against* Terra!

He could not tear his gaze away from the figures. He was numb, shocked with disbelief. 100-1. *What had happened?* What had gone wrong? The turret was finished, Icarus was ready, the fleet had been notified —

There was a sudden deep buzz from outside the building. Shouts drifted up from below. Reinhart turned his head slowly toward the window, his heart frozen with fear.

Across the evening sky a trail moved, rising each moment. A thin line of white. Something climbed, gaining speed each moment. On the ground, all eyes were turned toward it, awed faces peering up.

The object gained speed. Faster and faster. Then it vanished. Icarus was on his way. The attack had begun; it was too late to stop, now.

And on the machines the odds read a hundred to one — for failure. At eight o'clock in the evening of May 15, 2136, Icarus was launched toward the star Centaurus. A day later, while all Terra waited, Icarus entered the star, traveling at thousands of times the speed of light.

Nothing happened. Icarus disappeared into the star. There was no explosion. The bomb failed to go off.

At the same time the Terran warfleet engaged the Centauran outer fleet, sweeping down in a concentrated attack. Twenty major ships were seized. A good part of the Centauran fleet was destroyed. Many of the captive systems began to revolt, in the hope of throwing off the Imperial bonds.

Two hours later the massed Centauran warfleet from Armun abruptly appeared and joined battle. The great struggle illuminated half the Centauran system. Ship after ship flashed briefly and then faded to ash. For a whole day the two fleets fought, strung out over millions of miles of space. Innumerable fighting men died — on both sides.

At last the remains of the battered Terran fleet turned and limped toward Armun — defeated. Little of the once impressive armada remained. A few blackened hulks, making their way uncertainly toward captivity.

Icarus had not functioned. Centaurus had not exploded. The attack was a failure.

The war was over.

"We've lost the war," Margaret Duffe said in a small voice, wondering and awed. "It's over. Finished."

The Council members sat in their places around the conference table, gray-haired elderly men, none of them speaking or moving. All gazed up mutely at the great stellar maps that covered two walls of the chamber.

"I have already empowered negotiators to arrange a truce," Margaret Duffe murmured. "Orders have been sent out to Vice-Commander Jessup to give up the battle. There's no hope. Fleet Commander Carleton destroyed himself and his flagship a few minutes ago. The Centauran High Council has agreed to end the fighting. Their whole Empire is rotten to the core. Ready to topple of its own weight."

Reinhart was slumped over at the table, his head in his hands. "I don't understand… *Why?* Why didn't the bomb explode?" He mopped his forehead shakily. All his poise was gone. He was trembling and broken. *"What went wrong?"*

Gray-faced, Dixon mumbled an answer. "The variable man must have sabotaged the turret. The SRB machines knew… They analyzed the data. *They knew!* But it was too late."

Reinhart's eyes were bleak with despair as he raised his head a little. "I knew he'd destroy us. We're finished. A century of work and planning." His body knotted in a spasm of furious agony. "All because of Sherikov!"

Margaret Duffe eyed Reinhart coldly. "Why because of Sherikov?"

"He kept Cole alive! I wanted him killed from the start." Suddenly Reinhart jumped from his chair. His hand clutched convulsively at his gun. "And he's *still* alive! Even if we've lost I'm going to have the pleasure of putting a blast beam through Cole's chest!"

"Sit down!" Margaret Duffe ordered.

Reinhart was halfway to the door. "He's still at the Euthanasia Ministry, waiting for the official —"

“No, he’s not,” Margaret Duffe said.

Reinhart froze. He turned slowly, as if unable to believe his sense. *“What?”*

“Cole isn’t at the Ministry. I ordered him transferred and your instructions cancelled.”

“Where — where is he?”

There was unusual hardness in Margaret Duffe’s voice as she answered. “With Peter Sherikov. In the Urals. I had Sherikov’s full authority restored. I then had Cole transferred there, put in Sherikov’s safekeeping. I want to make sure Cole recovers, so we can keep our promise to him — our promise to return him to his own time.”

Reinhart’s mouth opened and closed. All the color had drained from his face. His cheek muscles twitched spasmodically. At last he managed to speak. “You’ve gone insane! The traitor responsible for Earth’s greatest defeat —”

“We have lost the war,” Margaret Duffe stated quietly. “But this is not a day of defeat. It is a day of victory. The most incredible victory Terra has ever had.”

Reinhart and Dixon were dumbfounded. “What —” Reinhart gasped. “What do you —” The whole room was in an uproar. All the Council members were on their feet. Reinhart’s words were drowned out.

“Sherikov will explain when he gets here,” Margaret Duffe’s calm voice came. “He’s the one who discovered it.” She looked around the chamber at the incredulous Council members. “Everyone stay in his seat. You are all to remain here until Sherikov arrives. It’s vital you hear what he has to say. His news transforms this whole situation.”

Peter Sherikov accepted the briefcase of papers from his armed technician. “Thanks.” He pushed his chair back and glanced thoughtfully around the Council chamber. “Is everybody ready to hear what I have to say?”

“We’re ready,” Margaret Duffe answered. The Council members sat alertly around the table. At the far end, Reinhart and Dixon watched uneasily as the big Pole removed papers from his briefcase and carefully examined them.

“To begin, I recall to you the original work behind the ftl bomb. Jamison Hedge was the first human to propel an object at a speed greater than light. As you know, that object diminished in length and gained in mass as it moved toward light speed. When it reached that speed it vanished. It ceased to exist in our terms. Having no length it could not occupy space. It rose to a different order of existence.

“When Hedge tried to bring the object back, an explosion occurred. Hedge was killed, and all his equipment was destroyed. The force of the blast was beyond calculation. Hedge had placed his observation ship many millions of miles away. It was not far enough, however. Originally, he had hoped his drive might be used for space travel. But after his death the principle was abandoned.

“That is — until Icarus. I saw the possibilities of a bomb, an incredibly powerful bomb to destroy Centaurus and all the Empire’s forces. The reappearance of Icarus would mean the annihilation of their System. As Hedge had shown, the object would reenter space already occupied by matter, and the cataclysm would be beyond belief.”

“But Icarus never came back,” Reinhart cried. “Cole altered the wiring so the bomb kept on going. It’s probably still going.”

“Wrong,” Sherikov boomed. “The bomb *did* reappear. But it didn’t explode.”

Reinhart reacted violently. “You mean —”

“The bomb came back, dropping below the ftl speed as soon as it entered the star Proxima. But it did not explode. There was no cataclysm. It reappeared and was absorbed by the sun, turned into gas at once.”

“Why didn’t it explode?” Dixon demanded.

“Because Thomas Cole solved Hedge’s problem. He found a way to bring the ftl object back into this universe without collision. Without an explosion. The variable man found what Hedge was after… .”

The whole Council was on its feet. A growing murmur filled the chamber, a rising pandemonium breaking out on all sides.

“I don’t believe it!” Reinhart gasped. “It isn’t possible. If Cole solved Hedge’s problem that would mean —” He broke off, staggered.

“Faster than light drive can now be used for space travel,” Sherikov continued, waving the noise down. “As Hedge intended. My men have studied the photographs of the control turret. They don’t know *how* or *why*, yet. But we have complete records of the turret. We can duplicate the wiring, as soon as the laboratories have been repaired.”

Comprehension was gradually beginning to settle over the room. “Then it’ll be possible to build ftl ships,” Margaret Duffe murmured, dazed. “And if we can do that —”

“When I showed him the control turret, Cole understood its purpose. Not *my* purpose, but the original purpose Hedge had been working toward. Cole realized Icarus was actually an incomplete spaceship, not a bomb at all. He saw what Hedge had seen, an ftl space drive. He set out to make Icarus work.”

“We can go *beyond* Centaurus,” Dixon murmured. His lips twisted. “Then the war was trivial. We can leave the Empire completely behind. We can go beyond the galaxy.”

“The whole universe is open to us,” Sherikov agreed. “Instead of taking over an antiquated Empire, we have the entire cosmos to map and explore, God’s total creation.”

Margaret Duffe got to her feet and moved slowly toward the great stellar maps that towered above them at the far end of the chamber. She stood for a long time, gazing up at the myriad suns, the legions of systems, awed by what she saw.

“Do you suppose he realized all this?” she asked suddenly. “What we can see, here on these maps?”

“Thomas Cole is a strange person,” Sherikov said, half to himself. “Apparently he has a kind of intuition about machines, the way things are supposed to work. An intuition more in his hands than in his head. A kind of genius, such as a painter or a pianist has. Not a scientist. He has no verbal knowledge about things, no semantic references. He deals with the things themselves. Directly.

“I doubt very much if Thomas Cole understood what would come about. He looked into the globe, the control turret. He saw unfinished wiring and relays. He saw a job half done. An incomplete machine.”

“Something to be fixed,” Margaret Duffe put in.

“Something to be fixed. Like an artist, he saw his work ahead of him. He was interested in only one thing: turning out the best job he could, with the skill he possessed. For us, that skill has opened up a whole universe, endless galaxies and systems to explore. Worlds without end. Unlimited, *untouched* worlds.”

Reinhart got unsteadily to his feet. “We better get to work. Start organizing construction teams. Exploration crews. We’ll have to reconvert from war production to ship designing. Begin the manufacture of mining and scientific instruments for survey work.”

“That’s right,” Margaret Duffe said. She looked reflectively up at him. “But you’re not going to have anything to do with it.”

Reinhart saw the expression on her face. His hands flew to his gun and he backed quickly toward the door. Dixon leaped up and joined him. “Get back!” Reinhart shouted.

Margaret Duffe signaled and a phalanx of Government troops closed in around the two men. Grim-faced, efficient soldiers with magnetic grapples ready.

Reinhart’s blaster wavered — toward the Council members sitting shocked in their seats, and toward Margaret Duffe, straight at her blue eyes. Reinhart’s features were distorted with insane fear. “Get back! Don’t anybody come near me or she’ll be the first to get it!”

Peter Sherikov slid from the table and with one great stride swept his immense bulk in front of Reinhart. His huge black-furred fist rose in a smashing arc. Reinhart sailed against the wall, struck with ringing force and then slid slowly to the floor.

The Government troops threw their grapples quickly around him and jerked him to his feet. His body was frozen rigid. Blood dripped from his mouth. He spat bits of tooth, his eyes glazed over. Dixon stood dazed, mouth open, uncomprehending, as the grapples closed around his arms and legs.

Reinhart’s gun skidded to the floor as he was yanked toward the door. One of the elderly Council members picked the gun up and examined it

curiously. He laid it carefully on the table. “Fully loaded,” he murmured. “Ready to fire.”

Reinhart’s battered face was dark with hate. “I should have killed all of *you. All of you!”* An ugly sneer twisted across his shredded lips. “If I could get my hands loose —”

“You won’t,” Margaret Duffe said. “You might as well not even bother to think about it.” She signaled to the troops and they pulled Reinhart and Dixon roughly out of the room, two dazed figures, snarling and resentful.

For a moment the room was silent. Then the Council members shuffled nervously in their seats, beginning to breathe again.

Sherikov came over and put his big paw on Margaret Duffe’s shoulder. “Are you all right, Margaret?”

She smiled faintly. “I’m fine. Thanks… .”

Sherikov touched her soft hair briefly. Then he broke away and began to pack up his briefcase busily. “I have to go. I’ll get in touch with you later.”

“Where are you going?” she asked hesitantly. “Can’t you stay and —”

“I have to get back to the Urals.” Sherikov grinned at her over his bushy black beard as he headed out of the room. “Some very important business to attend to.”

Thomas Cole was sitting up in bed when Sherikov came to the door. Most of his awkward, hunched-over body was sealed in a thin envelope of transparent air-proof plastic. Two robot attendants whirred ceaselessly at his side, their leads contacting his pulse, blood-pressure, respiration, and body temperature.

Cole turned a little as the huge Pole tossed down his briefcase and seated himself on the window ledge.

“How are you feeling?” Sherikov asked him.

“Better.”

“You see we’ve quite advanced therapy. Your burns should be healed in a few months.”

“How is the war coming?”

“The war is over.”

Cole’s lips moved. “Icarus —”

“Icarus went as expected. As *you* expected.” Sherikov leaned toward the bed. “Cole, I promised you something, I mean to keep my promise — as soon as you’re well enough.”

“To return me to my own time?”

“That’s right. It’s a relatively simple matter, now that Reinhart has been removed from power. You’ll be back home again, back in your own time, your own world. We can supply you with some discs of platinum or something of the kind to finance your business. You need a new Fixit truck. Tools. And clothes. A few thousand dollars ought to do it.”

Cole was silent.

“I’ve already contacted histo-research,” Sherikov continued. “The time bubble is ready as soon as you are. We’re somewhat beholden to you, as you probably realize. You’ve made it possible for us to actualize our greatest dream. The whole planet is seething with excitement. We’re changing our economy over from war to —”

“They don’t resent what happened? The dud must have made an awful lot of people feel downright bad.”

“At first. But they got over it — as soon as they understood what was ahead. Too bad you won’t be here to see it, Cole. A whole world breaking loose. Bursting out into the universe. They want me to have an ftl ship ready by the end of the week! Thousands of applications are already on file, men and women wanting to get in on the initial flight.”

Cole smiled a little. “There won’t be any band, there. No parade or welcoming committee waiting for them.”

“Maybe not. Maybe the first ship will wind up on some dead world, nothing but sand and dried salt. But everyone wants to go. It’s almost like a holiday. People running around and shouting and throwing things in the streets.

“Afraid I must get back to the labs. Lots of reconstruction work being started.” Sherikov dug into his bulging briefcase. “By the way… One little thing. While you’re recovering here, you might like to look at these.” He tossed a handful of schematics on the bed.

Cole picked them up slowly. “What’s this?”

“Just a little thing I designed.” Sherikov arose and lumbered toward the door. “We’re realigning our political structure to eliminate any recurrence of the Reinhart affair. This will block any more one-man power grabs.” He jabbed a thick finger at the schematics. “It’ll turn power over to all of us, not to just a limited number one person could dominate — the way Reinhart dominated the Council.

“This gimmick makes it possible for citizens to raise and decide issues directly. They won’t have to wait for the Council to verbalize a measure. Any citizen can transmit his will with one of these, make his needs register on a central control that automatically responds. When a large enough

segment of the population wants a certain thing done, these little gadgets set up an active field that touches all the others. An issue won't have to go through a formal Council. The citizens can express their will long before any bunch of gray-haired old men could get around to it."

Sherikov broke off, frowning. "Of course," he continued slowly, "there's one little detail…"

"What's that?"

"I haven't been able to get a model to function. A few bugs… Such intricate work never was in my line." He paused at the door. "Well, I hope I'll see you again before you go. Maybe if you feel well enough later on we could get together for one last talk. Maybe have dinner sometime. Eh?"

But Thomas Cole wasn't listening. He was bent over the schematics, an intense frown on his weathered face. His long fingers moved restlessly over the schematics, tracing wiring and terminals. His lips moved as he calculated.

Sherikov waited a moment. Then he stepped out into the hall and softly closed the door after him.

He whistled merrily as he strode off down the corridor.

The Indefatigable Frog

“Zeno was the first great scientist,” Professor Hardy stated, looking sternly around his classroom. “For example, take his paradox of the frog and the well. As Zeno showed, the frog will never reach the top of the well. Each jump is half the previous jump; a small but very real margin always remains for him to travel.”

There was silence, as the afternoon Physics 3-A Class considered Hardy’s oracular utterance. Then, in the back of the room, a hand slowly went up.

Hardy stared at the hand in disbelief. “Well?” he said. “What is it, Pitner?”

“But in Logic we were told the frog *would* reach the top of the well. Professor Grote said —”

“The frog will not!”

“Professor Grote says he will.”

Hardy folded his arms. “In this class the frog will never reach the top of the well. I have examined the evidence myself. I am satisfied that he will always be a small distance away. For example, if he jumps —”

The bell rang.

All the students rose to their feet and began to move towards the door. Professor Hardy stared after them, his sentence half finished. He rubbed his jaw with displeasure, frowning at the horde of young men and women with their bright, vacant faces.

When the last of them had gone, Hardy picked up his pipe and went out of the room into the hall. He looked up and down. Sure enough, not far off was Grote, standing by the drinking fountain, wiping his chin.

“Grote!” Hardy said. “Come here!”

Professor Grote looked up, blinking, “What?”

“Come here,” Hardy strode up to him. “How dare you try to teach Zeno? He was a scientist, and as such he’s my property to teach, not yours. Leave Zeno to me!”

“Zeno was a philosopher.” Grote stared up indignantly at Hardy. “I know what’s on your mind. It’s that paradox about the frog and the well. For your information, Hardy, the frog will easily get out. You’ve been misleading your students. Logic is on my side.”

“Logic, bah!” Hardy snorted, his eyes blazing. “Old dusty maxims. It’s obvious that the frog is trapped forever, in an eternal prison and can never get away!”

“He will escape.”

“He will not.”

“Are you gentlemen quite through?” a calm voice said. They turned quickly around. The Dean was standing quietly behind them, smiling gently. “If you are through, I wonder if you’d mind coming into my office for a moment.” He nodded towards his door. “It won’t take too long.”

Grote and Hardy looked at each other. “See what you’ve done?” Hardy whispered, as they filed into the Dean’s office. “You’ve got us into trouble again.”

“You started it — you and your frog!”

“Sit down, gentlemen.” The Dean indicated two stiff-backed chairs. “Make yourselves comfortable. I’m sorry to trouble you when you’re so busy, but I do wish to speak to you for a moment.” He studied them moodily. “May I ask what is the nature of your discussion this time?”

“It’s about Zeno,” Grote murmured.

“Zeno?”

“The paradox about the frog and the well.”

“I see.” The Dean nodded. “I see. The frog and the well. A two thousand-year-old saw. An ancient puzzle. And you two grown men stand in the hall arguing like a —”

“The difficulty,” Hardy said, after a time, “is that no one has ever performed the experiment. The paradox is a pure abstraction.”

“Then you two are going to be the first to lower the frog into his well and actually see what happens.”

“But the frog won’t jump in conformity to the conditions of the paradox.”

“Then you’ll have to make him, that’s all. I’ll give you two weeks to set up control conditions and determine the truth of this miserable puzzle. I want no more wrangling, month after month. I want this settled, once and for all.”

Hardy and Grote were silent.

“Well, Grote,” Hardy said at last, “let’s get it started.”

“We’ll need a net,” Grote said.

“A net and a jar.” Hardy sighed. “We might as well be at it as soon as possible.”

The “Frog Chamber,” as it got to be called, was quite a project. The University donated most of the basement to them, and Grote and Hardy set to work at once, carrying parts and materials downstairs. There wasn’t a soul who didn’t know about it before long. Most of the science majors were on Hardy’s side; they formed a Failure Club and denounced the frog’s efforts. In the philosophy and art departments there was some agitation for a Success Club, but nothing ever came of it.

Grote and Hardy worked feverishly on the project. They were absent from their classes more and more of the time, as the two weeks wore on. The Chamber itself grew and developed, resembling more and more a long section of sewer pipe running the length of the basement. One end of it disappeared into a maze of wires and tubes: at the other there was a door.

One day when Grote went downstairs there was Hardy already, peering into the tube.

“See here,” Grote said, “we agreed to keep hands off unless both of us were present.”

“I’m just looking inside. It’s dark in there.” Hardy grinned. “I hope the frog will be able to see.”

“Well, there’s only one way to go.”

Hardy lit his pipe. “What do you think of trying out a sample frog? I’m itching to see what happens.”

“It’s too soon.” Grote watched nervously as Hardy searched about for his jar. “Shouldn’t we wait a bit?”

“Can’t face reality, eh? Here, give me a hand.”

There was a sudden sound, a scraping at the door. They looked up. Pitner was standing there, looking curiously into the room, at the elongated Frog Chamber.

“What do you want?” Hardy said. “We’re very busy.”

“Are you going to try it out?” Pitner came into the room. “What are all the coils and relays for?”

“It’s very simple,” Grote said, beaming. “Something I worked out myself. This end here —”

“I’ll show him,” Hardy said. “You’ll only confuse him. Yes, we were about to run the first trial frog. You can stay, boy, if you want.” He opened the jar and took a damp frog from it. “As you can see, the big tube has an entrance and an exit. The frog goes in the entrance. Look inside the tube, boy. Go on.”

Pitner peered into the open end of the tube. He saw a long black tunnel. “What are the lines?”

“Measuring lines. Grote, turn it on.”

The machinery came on, humming softly. Hardy took the frog and dropped him into the tube. He swung the metal door shut and snapped it tight. “That’s so the frog won’t get out again, at this end.”

“How big a frog were you expecting?” Pitner said. “A full-grown man could get into that.”

“Now watch.” Hardy turned the gas cock up. “This end of the tube is warmed. The heat drives the frog up the tube. We’ll watch through the window.”

They looked into the tube. The frog was sitting quietly in a little heap, staring sadly ahead.

“Jump, you stupid frog,” Hardy said. He turned the gas up.

“Not so high, you maniac!” Grote shouted. “Do you want to stew him?”

“Look!” Pitner cried. “There he goes.”

The frog jumped. “Conduction carries the heat along the tube bottom,” Hardy explained. “He has to keep on jumping to get away from it. Watch him go.”

Suddenly Pitner gave a frightened rattle. “My God, Hardy. The frog has shrunk. He’s only half as big as he was.”

Hardy beamed. “That is the miracle. You see, at the far end of the tube there is a force field. The frog is compelled to jump towards it by the heat. The effect of the field is to reduce animal tissue to its proximity. The frog is made smaller the farther he goes.”

“Why?”

“It’s the only way the jumping span of the frog can be reduced. As the frog leaps he diminishes in size, and hence each leap is proportionally reduced. We have arranged it so that the diminution is the same as in Zeno’s paradox.”

“But where does it all end?”

“That,” Hardy said, “is the question to which we are devoted. At the far end of the tube there is a photon beam which the frog would pass through, if he ever got that far. If he could reach it, he would cut off the field.”

“He’ll reach it,” Grote muttered.

“No. He’ll get smaller and smaller, and jump shorter and shorter. To him, the tube will lengthen more and more, endlessly. He will never get there.”

They glared at each other. “Don’t be so sure,” Grote said.

They peered through the window into the tube. The frog had gone quite a distance up. He was almost invisible, now, a tiny speck no larger than a fly, moving imperceptibly along the tube. He became smaller. He was a pin point. He disappeared.

“Gosh,” Pitner said.

“Pitner, go away,” Hardy said. He rubbed his hands together. “Grote and I have things to discuss.”

He locked the door after the boy.

“All right,” Grote said. “You designed this tube. What became of the frog?”

“Why, he’s still hopping, somewhere in a sub-atomic world.”

“You’re a swindler. Some place along that tube the frog met with misfortune.”

“Well,” Hardy said. “If you think that, perhaps you should inspect the tube personally.”

“I believe I will. I may find a trap door.”

“Suit yourself,” Hardy said, grinning. He turned off the gas and opened the big metal door.

“Give me the flashlight,” Grote said. Hardy handed him the flashlight and he crawled into the tube, grunting. His voice echoed hollowly. “No tricks, now.”

Hardy watched him disappear. He bent down and looked into the end of the tube. Grote was halfway down, wheezing and struggling. “What’s the matter?” Hardy said.

“Too tight….”

“Oh?” Hardy’s grin broadened. He took his pipe from his mouth and set it on the table. “Well, maybe we can do something about that.”

He slammed the metal door shut. He hurried to the other end of the tube and snapped the switches. Tubes lit up, relays clicked into place.

Hardy folded his arms. “Start hopping, my dear frog,” he said. “Hop for all you’re worth.”

He went to the gas cock and turned it on.

It was very dark. Grote lay for a long time without moving. His mind was filled with drifting thoughts. What was the matter with Hardy? What was he up to? At last he pulled himself on to his elbows. His head cracked against the roof of the tube.

It began to get warm. “Hardy!” His voice thundered around him, loud and panicky. “Open the door. What’s going on?”

He tried to turn around in the tube, to reach the door, but he couldn't budge. There was nothing to do but go forward. He began to crawl, muttering under his breath. "Just wait, Hardy. You and your jokes. I don't see what you expect to —"

Suddenly the tube leaped. He fell, his chin banging against the metal. He blinked. The tube had grown; now there was more than enough room. And his clothing! His shirt and pants were like a tent around him.

"Oh, heavens," Grote said in a tiny voice. He rose to his knees. Laboriously he turned around. He pulled himself back through the tube the way he had come, towards the metal door. He pushed against it, but nothing happened. It was now too large for him to force.

He sat for a long time. When the metal floor under him became too warm he crawled reluctantly along the tube to a cooler place. He curled himself up and stared dismally into the darkness. "What am I going to do," he asked himself.

After a time a measure of courage returned to him. "I must think logically. I've already entered the force field once, therefore I'm reduced in size by one-half. I must be about three feet high. That makes the tube twice as long."

He got out the flashlight and some paper from his immense pocket and did some figuring. The flashlight was almost unmanageable.

Underneath him the floor became warm. Automatically he shifted, a little up the tube to avoid the heat. "If I stay here long enough," he murmured, "I might be —"

The tube leaped again, rushing off in all directions. He found himself floundering in a sea of rough fabric, choking and gasping. At last he struggled free.

“One and a half feet,” Grote said, staring around him. “I don’t dare move any more, not at all.”

But when the floor heated under him he moved some more. “Three-quarters of a foot.” Sweat broke out on his face. “Three-quarters of one foot.” He looked down the tube. Far, far down at the end was a spot of light, the photon beam crossing the tube. If he could reach it, if only he could reach it, if only he could reach it!

He meditated over his figures for a time. “Well,” he said at last, “I hope I’m correct. According to my calculations I should reach the beam of light in about nine hours and thirty minutes, if I keep walking steadily.” He took a deep breath and lifted the flashlight to his shoulder.

“However,” he murmured, “I may be rather small by that time… .” He started walking, his chin up.

Professor Hardy turned to Pitner. “Tell the class what you saw this morning.”

Everyone turned to look. Pitner swallowed nervously. “Well, I was downstairs in the basement. I was asked in to see the Frog Chamber. By Professor Grote. They were going to start the experiment.”

“What experiment do you refer to?”

“The Zeno one,” he explained nervously. “The frog. He put the frog in tube and closed the door. And then Professor Grote turned on the power.”

“What occurred?”

“The frog started to hop. He got smaller.”

“He got smaller, you say. And then what?”

“He disappeared.”

Professor Hardy sat back in his chair. “The frog did not reach the end of the tube, then?”

“No.”

“That’s all.” There was a murmuring from the class. “So you see, the frog did not reach the end of the tube, as expected by my colleague, Professor Grote. He will never reach the end. Alas, we shall not see the unfortunate frog again.”

There was a general stir. Hardy tapped with his pencil. He lit his pipe and puffed calmly, leaning back in his chair. “This experiment was quite an awakener to poor Grote, I’m afraid. He has had a blow of some unusual proportion. As you may have noticed, he hasn’t appeared for his afternoon classes. Professor Grote, I understand, has decided to go on a long vacation to the mountains. Perhaps after he has had time to rest and enjoy himself, and to forget —”

Grote winced. But he kept on walking. “Don’t get frightened,” he said to himself. “Keep on.”

The tube jumped again. He staggered. The flashlight crashed to the floor and went out. He was alone in the enormous cave, an immense void that seemed to have no end, no end at all.

He kept walking.

After a time he began to get tired again. It was not the first time. “A rest wouldn’t do any harm.” He sat down. The floor was rough under him, rough and uneven. “According to my figures it will be more like two days, or so. Perhaps a little longer… .”

He rested, dozing a little. Later on he began to walk again. The sudden jumping of the tube had ceased to frighten him; he had grown accustomed to it. Sooner or later he would reach the photon beam and cut through it. The force field would go off and he would resume his normal size. Grote smiled a little to himself. Wouldn't Hardy be surprised to —

He stubbed his toe and fell, headlong into the blackness around him. A deep fear ran through him and he began to tremble. He stood up, staring around him.

Which way?

"My God," he said. He bent down and touched the floor under him. Which way? Time passed. He began to walk slowly, first one way, then another. He could make out nothing, nothing at all.

Then he was running, hurrying through the darkness, this way and that, slipping and falling. All at once he staggered. The familiar sensation: he breathed a sobbing sigh of relief. He was moving in the right direction! He began to run again, calmly, taking deep breaths, his mouth open. Then once more the staggering shudder as he shrank down another notch; but he was going the right way. He ran on and on.

And as he ran the floor became rougher and rougher. Soon he was forced to stop, falling over boulders and rocks. Hadn't they smoothed the pipe down? What had gone wrong with the sanding, the steel wool —

"Of course," he murmured. "Even the surface of a razor blade… if one is small… ."

He walked ahead, feeling his way along. There was a dim light over everything, rising up from the great stones around him, even from his own body. What was it? He looked at his hands. They glittered in the darkness.

"Heat," he said. "Of course. Thanks, Hardy." In the half light he leaped from stone to stone. He was running across an endless plain of rocks and boulders, jumping like a goat, from crag to crag. "Or like a frog," he said.

He jumped on, stopping once in a while for breath. How long would it be? He looked at the size of the great blocks of ore piled up around him. Suddenly a terror rushed through him.

“Maybe I shouldn’t figure it out,” he said. He climbed up the side of one towering cliff and leaped across to the other side. The next gulf was even wider. He barely made it, gasping and struggling to catch hold.

He jumped endlessly, again and again. He forgot how many times.

He stood on the edge of a rock and leaped.

Then he was falling, down, down, into the cleft, into the dim light. There was no bottom. On and on he fell.

Professor Grote closed his eyes. Peace came over him, his tired body relaxed.

“No more jumping,” he said, drifting down, down. “A certain law regarding falling bodies… the smaller the body the less the effect of gravity. No wonder bugs fall so lightly… certain characteristics… .”

He closed his eyes and allowed the darkness to take him over, at last.

“And so,” Professor Hardy said, “we can expect to find that this experiment will go down in science as —”

He stopped, frowning. The class was staring towards the door. Some of the students were smiling, and one began to laugh. Hardy turned to see what it; was.

“Shades of Charles Fort,” he said.

A frog came hopping into the room.

Pitner stood up. “Professor,” he said excitedly. “This confirms a theory I’ve worked out. The frog became so reduced in size that he passed through the spaces —”

“What?” Hardy said. “This is another frog.”

“—through the spaces between the molecules which form the floor of the Frog Chamber. The frog would then drift slowly to the floor, since he would be proportionally less affected by the law of acceleration. And leaving the force field, he would regain his original size.”

Pitner beamed down at the frog as the frog slowly made his way across the room.

“Really,” Professor Hardy began. He sat down at his desk weakly. At that moment the bell rang, and the students began to gather their books and papers together. Presently Hardy found himself alone, staring down at the frog. He shook his head. “It can’t be,” he murmured. “The world is full of frogs. It can’t be the same frog.”

A student came up to the desk. “Professor Hardy —”

Hardy looked up.

“Yes? What is it?”

“There’s a man outside in the hall wants to see you. He’s upset. He has a blanket on.”

All right,” Hardy said. He sighed and got to his feet. At the door he paused, taking a deep breath. Then he set his jaw and went out into the hall.

Grote was standing there, wrapped in a red-wool blanket, his face flushed with excitement. Hardy glanced at him apologetically.

“We still don’t know!” Grote cried.

“What?” Hardy murmured. “Say, er, Grote —”

“We still don’t know whether the frog would have reached the end of the tube. He and I fell out between the molecules. We’ll have to find some other way to test the paradox. The Chamber’s no good.”

“Yes, true,” Hardy said. “Say, Grote —”

“Let’s discuss it later,” Grote said. “I have to get to my classes. I’ll look you up this evening.”

And he hurried off down the hall clutching his blanket.

The Crystal Crypt

“Attention Inner-Flight ship! Attention! You are ordered to land at the Control Station on Deimos for inspection. Attention! You are to land at once!”

The metallic rasp of the speaker echoed through the corridors of the great ship. The passengers glanced at each other uneasily, murmuring and peering out the port windows at the small speck below, the dot of rock that was the Martian checkpoint, Deimos.

“What’s up?” an anxious passenger asked one of the pilots, hurrying through the ship to check the escape lock.

“We have to land. Keep seated.” The pilot went on.

“Land? But why?” They all looked at each other. Hovering above the bulging Inner-Flight ship were three slender Martian pursuit craft, poised and alert for any emergency. As the Inner-Flight ship prepared to land the pursuit ships dropped lower, carefully maintaining themselves a short distance away.

“There’s something going on,” a woman passenger said nervously. “Lord, I thought we were finally through with those Martians. Now what?”

“I don’t blame them for giving us one last going over,” a heavy set business man said to his companion. “After all, we’re the last ship leaving Mars for Terra. We’re damn lucky they let us go at all.”

“You think there really will be war?” a young man said to the girl sitting in the seat next to him. “Those Martians won’t dare fight, not with our weapons and ability to produce. We could take care of Mars in a month. It’s all talk.”

The girl glanced at him. “Don’t be so sure. Mars is desperate. They’ll fight tooth and nail. I’ve been on Mars three years.” She shuddered. “Thank goodness I’m getting away. If —”

“Prepare to land!” the pilot’s voice came. The ship began to settle slowly, dropping down toward the tiny emergency field on the seldom visited moon. Down, down the ship dropped. There was a grinding sound, a sickening jolt. Then silence.

“We’ve landed,” the heavy set business man said. “They better not do anything to us! Terra will rip them apart if they violate one Space Article.”

“Please keep your seats,” the pilot’s voice came. “No one is to leave the ship, according to the Martian authorities. We are to remain here.”

A restless stir filled the ship. Some of the passengers began to read uneasily, others stared out at the deserted field, nervous and on edge, watching the three Martian pursuit ships land and disgorge groups of armed men.

The Martian soldiers were crossing the field quickly, moving toward them, running double time.

This Inner-Flight spaceship was the last passenger vessel to leave Mars for Terra. All other ships had long since left, returning to safety before the outbreak of hostilities. The passengers were the very last to go, the final group of Terrans to leave the grim red planet, business men, expatriates, tourists, any and all Terrans who had not already gone home.

“What do you suppose they want?” the young man said to the girl. “It’s hard to figure Martians out, isn’t it? First they give the ship clearance, let us take off, and now they radio us to set down again. By the way, my name’s Thacher, Bob Thacher. Since we’re going to be here awhile —”

The port lock opened. Talking ceased abruptly, as everyone turned. A black-clad Martian official, a Province Leiter, stood framed against the bleak sunlight, staring around the ship. Behind him a handful of Martian soldiers stood waiting, their guns ready.

"This will not take long," the Leiter said, stepping into the ship, the soldiers following him. "You will be allowed to continue your trip shortly."

An audible sigh of relief went through the passengers.

"Look at him," the girl whispered to Thacher. "How I hate those black uniforms!"

"He's just a Provincial Leiter," Thacher said. "Don't worry."

The Leiter stood for a moment, his hands on his hips, looking around at them without expression. "I have ordered your ship grounded so that an inspection can be made of all persons aboard," he said. "You Terrans are the last to leave our planet. Most of you are ordinary and harmless — I am not interested in you. I am interested in finding three saboteurs, three Terrans, two men and a woman, who have committed an incredible act of destruction and violence. They are said to have fled to this ship."

Murmurs of surprise and indignation broke out on all sides. The Leiter motioned the soldiers to follow him up the aisle.

"Two hours ago a Martian city was destroyed. Nothing remains, only a depression in the sand where the city was. The city and all its people have completely vanished. An entire city destroyed in a second! Mars will never rest until the saboteurs are captured. And we know they are aboard this ship."

"It's impossible," the heavy set business man said. "There aren't any saboteurs here."

“We’ll begin with you,” the Leiter said to him, stepping up beside the man’s seat. One of the soldiers passed the Leiter a square metal box. “This will soon tell us if you’re speaking the truth. Stand up. Get on your feet.”

The man rose slowly, flushing. “See here —”

“Are you involved in the destruction of the city? Answer!”

The man swallowed angrily. “I know nothing about any destruction of any city. And furthermore —”

“He is telling the truth,” the metal box said tonelessly.

“Next person.” The Leiter moved down the aisle.

A thin bald headed man stood up nervously. “No sir,” he said. “I don’t know a thing about it.”

“He is telling the truth,” the box affirmed.

“Next person! Stand up!”

One person after another stood, answered, and sat down again in relief. At last there were only a few people left who had not been questioned. The Leiter paused, studying them intently.

“Only five left. The three must be among you. We have narrowed it down.” His hand moved to his belt. Something flashed, a rod of pale fire. He raised the rod, pointing it steadily at the five people. “All right, the first one of you. What do you know about this destruction? Are you involved with the destruction of our city?”

“No, not at all,” the man murmured.

“Yes, he’s telling the truth,” the box intoned.

“Next!”

“Nothing — I know nothing. I had nothing to do with it.”

“True,” the box said.

The ship was silent. Three people remained, a middle-aged man and his wife and their son, a boy of about twelve. They stood in the corner, staring white-faced at the Leiter, at the rod in his dark fingers.

“It must be you,” the Leiter grated, moving toward them. The Martian soldiers raised their guns. “It *must* be you. You there, the boy. What do you know about the destruction of our city? Answer!”

The boy shook his head. “Nothing,” he whispered.

The box was silent for a moment. “He is telling the truth,” it said reluctantly.

“Next!”

“Nothing,” the woman muttered. “Nothing.”

“The truth.”

“Next!”

“I had nothing to do with blowing up your city,” the man said. “You’re wasting your time.”

“It is the truth,” the box said.

For a long time the Leiter stood, toying with his rod. At last he pushed it back in his belt and signalled the soldiers toward the exit lock.

“You may proceed on your trip,” he said. He walked after the soldiers. At the hatch he stopped, looking back at the passengers, his face grim. “You may go — But Mars will not allow her enemies to escape. The three saboteurs will be caught, I promise you.” He rubbed his dark jaw thoughtfully. “It is strange. I was certain they were on this ship.”

Again he looked coldly around at the Terrans.

“Perhaps I was wrong. All right, proceed! But remember: the three will be caught, even if it takes endless years. Mars will catch them and punish them! I swear it!”

For a long time no one spoke. The ship lumbered through space again, its jets firing evenly, calmly, moving the passengers toward their own planet, toward home. Behind them Deimos and the red ball that was Mars dropped farther and farther away each moment, disappearing and fading into the distance.

A sigh of relief passed through the passengers. “What a lot of hot air that was,” one grumbled.

“Barbarians!” a woman said.

A few of them stood up, moving out into the aisle, toward the lounge and the cocktail bar. Beside Thacher the girl got to her feet, pulling her jacket around her shoulders.

“Pardon me,” she said, stepping past him.

“Going to the bar?” Thacher said. “Mind if I come along?”

“I suppose not.”

They followed the others into the lounge, walking together up the aisle. “You know,” Thacher said, “I don’t even know your name, yet.”

“My name is Mara Gordon.”

“Mara? That’s a nice name. What part of Terra are you from? North America? New York?”

“I’ve been in New York,” Mara said. “New York is very lovely.” She was slender and pretty, with a cloud of dark hair tumbling down her neck, against her leather jacket.

They entered the lounge and stood undecided.

“Let’s sit at a table,” Mara said, looking around at the people at the bar, mostly men. “Perhaps over there.”

“But someone’s there already,” Thacher said. The heavy set business man had sat down at the table and deposited his sample case on the floor. “Do we want to sit with *him?”*

“Oh, it’s all right,” Mara said, crossing to the table. “May we sit here?” she said to the man.

The man looked up, half-rising. “It’s a pleasure,” he murmured. He studied Thacher intently. “However, a friend of mine will be joining me in a moment.”

“I’m sure there’s room enough for us all,” Mara said. She seated herself and Thacher helped her with her chair. He sat down, too, glancing up suddenly at Mara and the business man. They were looking at each other almost as if something had passed between them. The man was middle-aged, with a florid face and tired, grey eyes. His hands were mottled with the veins showing thickly. At the moment he was tapping nervously.

“My name’s Thacher,” Thacher said to him, holding out his hand. “Bob Thacher. Since we’re going to be together for a while we might as well get to know each other.”

The man studied him. Slowly his hand came out. “Why not? My name’s Erickson. Ralf Erickson.”

“Erickson?” Thacher smiled. “You look like a commercial man, to me.” He nodded toward the sample case on the floor. “Am I right?”

The man named Erickson started to answer, but at that moment there was a stir. A thin man of about thirty had come up to the table, his eyes bright, staring down at them warmly. “Well, we’re on our way,” he said to Erickson.

“Hello, Mara.” He pulled out a chair and sat down quickly, folding his hands on the table before him. He noticed Thacher and drew back a little. “Pardon me,” he murmured.

“Bob Thacher is my name,” Thacher said. “I hope I’m not intruding here.” He glanced around at the three of them, Mara, alert, watching him intently, heavyset Erickson, his face blank, and this person. “Say, do you three know each other?” he asked suddenly.

There was silence.

The robot attendant slid over soundlessly, poised to take their orders. Erickson roused himself. “Let’s see,” he murmured. “What will we have? Mara?”

“Whiskey and water.”

“You, Jan?”

The bright slim man smiled. “The same.”

“Thacher?”

“Gin and tonic.”

“Whiskey and water for me, also,” Erickson said. The robot attendant went off. It returned at once with the drinks, setting on the table. Each took his own. “Well,” Erickson said, holding his glass up. “To our mutual success.”

All drank, Thacher and the three of them, heavy set Erickson, Mara, her eyes nervous and alert, Jan, who had just come. Again a look passed between Mara and Erickson, a look so swift that he would have not caught it had he been looking directly at her.

“What line do you represent, Mr. Erickson?” Thacher asked.

Erickson glanced at him, then down at the sample case on the floor. He grunted. “Well, as you can see, I’m a salesman.”

Thacher smiled. “I knew it! You get so you can always spot a salesman right off by his sample case. A salesman always has to carry something to show. What are you in, sir?”

Erickson paused. He licked his thick lips, his eyes blank and lidded, like a toad’s. At last he rubbed his mouth with his hand and reached down, lifting up the sample case. He set it on the table in front of him.

“Well?” he said. “Perhaps we might even show Mr. Thacher.”

They all stared down at the sample case. It seemed to be an ordinary leather case, with a metal handle and a snap lock. “I’m getting curious,” Thacher said. “What’s in there? You’re all so tense. Diamonds? Stolen jewels?”

Jan laughed harshly, mirthlessly. “Erick, put it down. We’re not far enough away, yet.”

“Nonsense,” Erick rumbled. “We’re away, Jan.”

“Please,” Mara whispered. “Wait, Erick.”

“Wait? Why? What for? You’re so accustomed to —”

“Erick,” Mara said. She nodded toward Thacher. “We don’t know him, Erick. Please!”

“He’s a Terran, isn’t he?” Erickson said. “All Terrans are together in these times.” He fumbled suddenly at the catch lock on the case. “Yes, Mr. Thacher. I’m a salesman. We’re all salesmen, the three of us.”

“Then you do know each other.”

“Yes.” Erickson nodded. His two companions sat rigidly, staring down. “Yes, we do. Here, I’ll show you our line.”

He opened the case. From it he took a letter-knife, a pencil sharpener, a glass globe paperweight, a box of thumb tacks, a stapler, some clips, a plastic ashtray, and some things Thacher could not identify. He placed the objects in a row in front of him on the table top. Then he closed the sample case.

“I gather you’re in office supplies,” Thacher said. He touched the letter knife with his finger. “Nice quality steel. Looks like Swedish steel, to me.”

Erickson nodded, looking into Thacher’s face. “Not really an impressive business, is it? Office supplies. Ashtrays, paper clips.” He smiled.

“Oh —” Thacher shrugged. “Why not? They’re a necessity in modern business. The only thing I wonder —”

“What’s that?”

“Well, I wonder how you’d ever find enough customers on Mars to make it worth your while.” He paused, examining the glass paperweight. He lifted it, holding it to the light, staring at the scene within until Erickson took it out of his hand and put it back in the sample case. “And another thing. If you three know each other, why did you sit apart when you got on?”

They looked at him quickly.

“And why didn’t you speak to each other until we left Deimos?” He leaned toward Erickson, smiling at him. “Two men and a woman. Three of you. Sitting apart in the ship. Not speaking, not until the check-station was past. I find myself thinking over what the Martian said. Three saboteurs. A woman and two men.”

Erickson put the things back in the sample case. He was smiling, but his face had gone chalk white. Mara stared down, playing with a drop of water on the edge of her glass. Jan clenched his hands together nervously, blinking rapidly.

“You three are the ones the Leiter was after,” Thacher said softly. “You are the destroyers, the saboteurs. But their lie detector — Why didn’t it trap you? How did you get by that? And now you’re safe, outside the check-station.” He grinned, staring around at them. “I’ll be damned! And I really thought you were a salesman, Erickson. You really fooled me.”

Erickson relaxed a little. “Well, Mr. Thacher, it’s in a good cause. I’m sure you have no love for Mars, either. No Terran does. And I see you’re leaving with the rest of us.”

“True,” Thacher said. “You must certainly have an interesting account to give, the three of you.” He looked around the table.

“We still have an hour or so of travel. Sometimes it gets dull, this Mars-Terra run. Nothing to see, nothing to do but sit and drink in the lounge.” He raised his eyes slowly. “Any chance you’d like to spin a story to keep us awake?”

Jan and Mara looked at Erickson. “Go on,” Jan said. “He knows who we are. Tell him the rest of the story.”

“You might as well,” Mara said.

Jan let out a sigh suddenly, a sigh of relief. “Let’s put the cards on the table, get this weight off us. I’m tired of sneaking around, slipping —”

“Sure,” Erickson said expansively. “Why not?” He settled back in his chair, unbuttoning his vest. “Certainly, Mr. Thacher. I’ll be glad to spin you a story. And I’m sure it will be interesting enough to keep you awake.”

They ran through the groves of dead trees, leaping across the sun-baked Martian soil, running silently together. They went up a little rise, across a narrow ridge. Suddenly Erick stopped, throwing himself down flat on the ground. The others did the same, pressing themselves against the soil, gasping for breath.

“Be silent,” Erick muttered. He raised himself a little. “No noise. There’ll be Leiters nearby, from now on. We don’t dare take any chances.”

Between the three people lying in the grove of dead trees and the City was a barren, level waste of desert, over a mile of blasted sand. No trees or bushes marred the smooth, parched surface. Only an occasional wind, a dry wind eddying and twisting, blew the sand up into little rills. A faint odor came to them, a bitter smell of heat and sand, carried by the wind.

Erick pointed. “Look. The City — There it is.”

They stared, still breathing deeply from their race through the trees. The City was close, closer than they had ever seen it before. Never had they gotten so close to it in times past. Terrans were never allowed near the great Martian cities, the centers of Martian life. Even in ordinary times, when there was no threat of approaching war, the Martians shrewdly kept all Terrans away from their citadels, partly from fear, partly from a deep, innate sense of hostility toward the white-skinned visitors whose commercial ventures had earned them the respect, and the dislike, of the whole system.

"How does it look to you?" Erick said.

The City was huge, much larger than they had imagined from the drawings and models they had studied so carefully back in New York, in the War Ministry Office. Huge it was, huge and stark, black towers rising up against the sky, incredibly thin columns of ancient metal, columns that had stood wind and sun for centuries. Around the City was a wall of stone, red stone, immense bricks that had been lugged there and fitted into place by slaves of the early Martian dynasties, under the whiplash of the first great Kings of Mars.

An ancient, sun-baked City, a City set in the middle of a wasted plain, beyond groves of dead trees, a City seldom seen by Terrans — but a City studied on maps and charts in every War Office on Terra. A City that contained, for all its ancient stone and archaic towers, the ruling group of all Mars, the Council of Senior Leiters, black-clad men who governed and ruled with an iron hand.

The Senior Leiters, twelve fanatic and devoted men, black priests, but priests with flashing rods of fire, lie detectors, rocket ships, intra-space cannon, many more things the Terran Senate could only conjecture about. The Senior Leiters and their subordinate Province Leiters — Erick and the two behind him suppressed a shudder.

"We've got to be careful," Erick said again. "We'll be passing among them, soon. If they guess who we are, or what we're here for —"

He snapped open the case he carried, glancing inside for a second. Then he closed it again, grasping the handle firmly. “Let’s go,” he said. He stood up slowly. “You two come up beside me. I want to make sure you look the way you should.”

Mara and Jan stepped quickly ahead. Erick studied them critically as the three of them walked slowly down the slope, onto the plain, toward the towering black spires of the City.

“Jan,” Erick said. “Take hold of her hand! Remember, you’re going to marry her; she’s your bride. And Martian peasants think a lot of their brides.”

Jan was dressed in the short trousers and coat of the Martian farmer, a knotted rope tied around his waist, a hat on his head to keep off the sun. His skin was dark, colored by dye until it was almost bronze.

“You look fine,” Erick said to him. He glanced at Mara. Her black hair was tied in a knot, looped through a hollowed-out yuke bone. Her face was dark, too, dark and lined with colored ceremonial pigment, green and orange stripes across her cheeks. Earrings were strung through her ears. On her feet were tiny slippers of perruh hide, laced around her ankles, and she wore long translucent Martian trousers with a bright sash tied around her waist. Between her small breasts a chain of stone beads rested, good-luck charms for the coming marriage.

“All right,” Erick said. He, himself, wore the flowing gray robe of a Martian priest, dirty robes that were supposed to remain on him all his life, to be buried around him when he died. “I think we’ll get past the guards. There should be heavy traffic on the road.”

They walked on, the hard sand crunching under their feet. Against the horizon they could see specks moving, other persons going toward the City, farmers and peasants and merchants, bringing their crops and goods to market.

“See the cart!” Mara exclaimed.

They were nearing a narrow road, two ruts worn into the sand. A Martian hufa was pulling the cart, its great sides wet with perspiration, its tongue hanging out. The cart was piled high with bales of cloth, rough country cloth, hand dipped. A bent farmer urged the hufa on.

“And there.” She pointed, smiling.

A group of merchants riding small animals were moving along behind the cart, Martians in long robes, their faces hidden by sand masks. On each animal was a pack, carefully tied on with rope. And beyond the merchants, plodding dully along, were peasants and farmers in an endless procession, some riding carts or animals, but mostly on foot.

Mara and Jan and Erick joined the line of people, melting in behind the merchants. No one noticed them; no one looked up or gave any sign. The march continued as before. Neither Jan nor Mara said anything to each other. They walked a little behind Erick, who paced with a certain dignity, a certain bearing becoming his position.

Once he slowed down, pointing up at the sky. “Look,” he murmured, in the Martian hill dialect. “See that?”

Two black dots circled lazily. Martian patrol craft, the military on the outlook for any sign of unusual activity. War was almost ready to break out with Terra. Any day, almost any moment.

“We’ll be just in time,” Erick said. “Tomorrow will be too late. The last ship will have left Mars.”

“I hope nothing stops us,” Mara said. “I want to get back home when we’re through.”

Half an hour passed. They neared the City, the wall growing as they walked, rising higher and higher until it seemed to blot out the sky itself. A vast wall, a wall of eternal stone that had felt the wind and sun for centuries. A group of Martian soldiers were standing at the entrance, the single passage-gate hewn into the rock, leading to the City. As each person went through the soldiers examined him, poking his garments, looking into his load.

Erick tensed. The line had slowed almost to a halt. “It’ll be our turn, soon,” he murmured. “Be prepared.”

“Let’s hope no Leiters come around,” Jan said. “The soldiers aren’t so bad.”

Mara was staring up at the wall and the towers beyond. Under their feet the ground trembled, vibrating and shaking. She could see tongues of flame rising from the towers, from the deep underground factories and forges of the City. The air was thick and dense with particles of soot. Mara rubbed her mouth, coughing.

“Here they come,” Erick said softly.

The merchants had been examined and allowed to pass through the dark gate, the entrance through the wall into the City. They and their silent animals had already disappeared inside. The leader of the group of soldiers was beckoning impatiently to Erick, waving him on.

“Come along!” he said. “Hurry up there, old man.”

Erick advanced slowly, his arms wrapped around his body, looking down at the ground.

“Who are you and what’s your business here?” the soldier demanded, his hands on his hips, his gun hanging idly at his waist. Most of the soldiers were lounging lazily, leaning against the wall, some even squatting in the

shade. Flies crawled on the face of one who had fallen asleep, his gun on the ground beside him.

“My business?” Erick murmured. “I am a village priest.”

“Why do you want to enter the City?”

“I must bring these two people before the magistrate to marry them.” He indicated Mara and Jan, standing a little behind him. “That is the Law the Leiters have made.”

The soldier laughed. He circled around Erick. “What do you have in that bag you carry?”

“Laundry. We stay the night.”

“What village are you from?”

“Kranos.”

“Kranos?” The soldier looked to a companion. “Ever heard of Kranos?”

“A backward pig sty. I saw it once on a hunting trip.”

The leader of the soldiers nodded to Jan and Mara. The two of them advanced, their hands clasped, standing close together. One of the soldiers put his hand on Mara’s bare shoulder, turning her around.

“Nice little wife you’re getting,” he said. “Good and firm looking.” He winked, grinning lewdly.

Jan glanced at him in sullen resentment. The soldiers guffawed. “All right,” the leader said to Erick. “You people can pass.”

Erick took a small purse from his robes and gave the soldier a coin. Then the three of them went into the dark tunnel that was the entrance, passing through the wall of stones, into the City beyond.

They were within the City!

“Now,” Erick whispered. “Hurry.”

Around them the City roared and cracked, the sound of a thousand vents and machines, shaking the stones under their feet. Erick led Mara and Jan into a corner, by a row of brick warehouses. People were everywhere, hurrying back and forth, shouting above the din, merchants, peddlers, soldiers, street women. Erick bent down and opened the case he carried. From the case he quickly took three small coils of fine metal, intricate meshed wires and vanes worked together into a small cone. Jan took one and Mara took one. Erick put the remaining cone into his robe and snapped the case shut again.

“Now remember, the coils must be buried in such a way that the line runs through the center of the City. We must trisect the main section, where the largest concentration of buildings is. Remember the maps! Watch the alleys and streets carefully. Talk to no one if you can help it. Each of you has enough Martian money to buy your way out of trouble. Watch especially for cut-purses, and for heaven’s sake, don’t get lost.”

Erick broke off. Two black-clad Leiters were coming along the inside of the wall, strolling together with their hands behind their backs. They noticed the three who stood in the corner by the warehouses and stopped.

“Go,” Erick muttered. “And be back here at sundown.” He smiled grimly. “Or never come back.”

Each went off in a different way, walking quickly without looking back. The Leiters watched them go. “The little bride was quite lovely,” one Leiter said. “Those hill people have the stamp of nobility in their blood, from the old times.”

“A very lucky young peasant to possess her,” the other said. They went on. Erick looked after them, still smiling a little. Then he joined the surging mass of people that milled eternally through the streets of the City.

At dusk they met outside the gate. The sun was soon to set, and the air had turned thin and frigid. It cut through their clothing like knives.

Mara huddled against Jan, trembling and rubbing her bare arms.

“Well?” Erick said. “Did you both succeed?”

Around them peasants and merchants were pouring from the entrance, leaving the City to return to their farms and villages, starting the long trip back across the plain toward the hills beyond. None of them noticed the shivering girl and the young man and the old priest standing by the wall.

“Mine’s in place,” Jan said. “On the other side of the City, on the extreme edge. Buried by a well.”

“Mine’s in the industrial section,” Mara whispered, her teeth chattering. “Jan, give me something to put over me! I’m freezing.”

“Good,” Erick said. “Then the three coils should trisect dead center, if the models were correct.” He looked up at the darkening sky. Already, stars were beginning to show. Two dots, the evening patrol, moved slowly toward the horizon. “Let’s hurry. It won’t be long.”

They joined the line of Martians moving along the road, away from the City. Behind them the City was losing itself in the somber tones of night, its black spires disappearing into darkness.

They walked silently with the country people until the flat ridge of dead trees became visible on the horizon. Then they left the road and turned off, walking toward the trees.

“Almost time!” Erick said. He increased his pace, looking back at Jan and Mara impatiently.

“Come on!”

They hurried, making their way through the twilight, stumbling over rocks and dead branches, up the side of the ridge. At the top Erick halted, standing with his hands on his hips, looking back.

“See,” he murmured. “The City. The last time we’ll ever see it this way.”

“Can I sit down,” Mara said. “My feet hurt me.”

Jan pulled at Erick’s sleeve. “Hurry, Erick! Not much time left.” He laughed nervously. “If everything goes right we’ll be able to look at it — forever.”

“But not like this,” Erick murmured. He squatted down, snapping his case open. He took some tubes and wiring out and assembled them together on the ground, at the peak of the ridge. A small pyramid of wire and plastic grew, shaped by his expert hands.

At last he grunted, standing up. “All right.”

“Is it pointed directly at the City?” Mara asked anxiously, looking down at the pyramid.

Erick nodded. “Yes, it’s placed according —” He stopped, suddenly stiffening. “Get back! It’s time! *Hurry!*”

Jan ran, down the far side of the slope, away from the City, pulling Mara with him. Erick came quickly after, still looking back at the distant spires,

almost lost in the night sky.

“Down.”

Jan sprawled out, Mara beside him, her trembling body pressed against his. Erick settled down into the sand and dead branches, still trying to see. “I want to see it,” he murmured. “A miracle. I want to see —”

A flash, a blinding burst of violet light, lit up the sky. Erick clapped his hands over his eyes. The flash whitened, growing larger, expanding. Suddenly there was a roar, and a furious hot wind rushed past him, throwing him on his face in the sand. The hot dry wind licked and seared at them, crackling the bits of branches into flame. Mara and Jan shut their eyes, pressed tightly together.

“God —” Erick muttered.

The storm passed. They opened their eyes slowly. The sky was still alive with fire, a drifting cloud of sparks that was beginning to dissipate with the night wind, Erick stood up unsteadily, helping Jan and Mara to their feet. The three of them stood, staring silently across the dark waste, the black plain, none of them speaking.

The City was gone.

At last Erick turned away. “That part’s done,” he said. “Now the rest! Give me a hand, Jan. There’ll be a thousand patrol ships around here in a minute.”

“I see one already,” Mara said, pointing up. A spot winked in the sky, a rapidly moving spot. “They’re coming, Erick.” There was a throb of chill fear in her voice.

“I know.” Erick and Jan squatted on the ground around the pyramid of tubes and plastic, pulling the pyramid apart. The pyramid was fused, fused

together like molten glass. Erick tore the pieces away with trembling fingers. From the remains of the pyramid he pulled something forth, something he held up high, trying to make it out in the darkness. Jan and Mara came close to see, both staring up intently, almost without breath.

"There it is," Erick said. "There!"

In his hand was a globe, a small transparent globe of glass. Within the glass something moved, something minute and fragile, spires almost too small to be seen, microscopic, a complex web swimming within the hollow glass globe. A web of spires. A city.

Erick put the globe into the case and snapped it shut. "Let's go," he said. They began to lope back through the trees, back the way they had come before. "We'll change in the car," he said as they ran. "I think we should keep these clothes on until we're actually inside the car. We still might encounter someone."

"I'll be glad to get my own clothing on again," Jan said. "I feel funny in these little pants."

"How do you think I feel?" Mara gasped. "I'm freezing in this, what there is of it."

"All young Martian brides dress that way," Erick said. He clutched the case tightly as they ran. "I think it looks fine."

"Thank you," Mara said. "But it is cold."

"What do you suppose they'll think?" Jan asked. "They'll assume the City was destroyed, won't they? That's certain."

"Yes," Erick said. "They'll be sure it was blown up. We can count on that. And it will be damn important to us that they think so!"

“The car should be around here, someplace,” Mara said, slowing down.

“No. Farther on,” Erick said. “Past that little hill over there. In the ravine, by the trees. It’s so hard to see where we are.”

“Shall I light something?” Jan said.

“No. There may be patrols around who —”

He halted abruptly. Jan and Mara stopped beside him. “What —” Mara begin.

A light glimmered. Something stirred in the darkness. There was a sound.

“Quick!” Erick rasped. He dropped, throwing the case far away from him into the bushes. He straightened up tensely.

A figure loomed up, moving through the darkness, and behind it came more figures, men, soldiers in uniform. The light flashed up brightly, blinding them. Erick closed his eyes. The light left him, touching Mara and Jan, standing silently together, clasping hands. Then it flicked down to the ground and around in a circle.

A Leiter stepped forward, a tall figure in black, with his soldiers close behind him, their guns ready. “You three,” the Leiter said. “Who are you? Don’t move. Stand where you are.”

He came up to Erick, peering at him intently, his hard Martian face without expression. He went all around Erick, examining his robes, his sleeves.

“Please —” Erick began in a quavering voice, but the Leiter cut him off.

“I’ll do the talking. Who are you three? What are you doing here? Speak up.”

“We — we are going back to our village,” Erick muttered, staring down, his hands folded. “We were in the City, and now we are going home.”

One of the soldiers spoke into a mouthpiece. He clicked it off and put it away.

“Come with me,” the Leiter said. “We’re taking you in. Hurry along.”

“In? Back to the City?”

One of the soldiers laughed. “The City is gone,” he said. “All that’s left of it you can put in the palm of your hand.”

“But what happened?” Mara said.

“No one knows. Come on, hurry it up!”

There was a sound. A soldier came quickly out of the darkness. “A Senior Leiter,” he said. “Coming this way.” He disappeared again.

“A Senior Leiter.” The soldiers stood waiting, standing at a respectful attention. A moment later the Senior Leiter stepped into the light, a black-clad old man, his ancient face thin and hard, like a bird’s, eyes bright and alert. He looked from Erick to Jan.

“Who are these people?” he demanded.

“Villagers going back home.”

“No they’re not. They don’t stand like villagers. Villagers slump — diet poor food. These people are not villagers. I myself came from the hills, and

I know.”

He stepped close to Erick, looking keenly into his face. “Who are you? Look at his chin — he never shaved with a sharpened stone! Something is wrong here.”

In his hand a rod of pale fire flashed. “The City is gone, and with it at least half the Leiter Council. It is very strange, a flash, then heat, and a wind. But it was not fission. I am puzzled. All at once the City has vanished. Nothing is left but a depression in the sand.”

“We’ll take them in,” the other Leiter said. “Soldiers, surround them. Make certain that —”

“Run!” Erick cried. He struck out, knocking the rod from the Senior Leiter’s hand. They were all running, soldiers shouting, flashing their lights, stumbling against each other in the darkness. Erick dropped to his knees, groping frantically in the bushes. His fingers closed over the handle of the case and he leaped up. In Terran he shouted to Mara and Jan.

“Hurry! To the car! Run!” He set off, down the slope, stumbling through the darkness. He could hear soldiers behind him, soldiers running and falling. A body collided against him and he struck out. Someplace behind him there was a hiss, and a section of the slope went up in flames. The Leiter’s rod —

“Erick,” Mara cried from the darkness. He ran toward her. Suddenly he slipped, falling on a stone. Confusion and firing. The sound of excited voices.

“Erick, is that you?” Jan caught hold of him, helping him up. “The car. It’s over here. Where’s Mara?”

“I’m here,” Mara’s voice came. “Over here, by the car.”

A light flashed. A tree went up in a puff of fire, and Erick felt the singe of the heat against his face. He and Jan made their way toward the girl.

Mara’s hand caught his in the darkness.

“Now the car,” Erick said. “If they haven’t got to it.” He slid down the slope into the ravine, fumbling in the darkness, reaching and holding onto the handle of the case. Reaching, reaching —

He touched something cold and smooth. Metal, a metal door handle. Relief flooded through him. “I’ve found it! Jan, get inside. Mara, come on.” He pushed Jan past him, into the car. Mara slipped in after Jan, her small agile body crowding in beside him.

“Stop!” a voice shouted from above. “There’s no use hiding in that ravine. We’ll get you! Come up and —”

The sound of voices was drowned out by the roar of the car’s motor. A moment later they shot into the darkness, the car rising into the air. Treetops broke and cracked under them as Erick turned the car from side to side, avoiding the groping shafts of pale light from below, the last furious thrusts from the two Leiters and their soldiers.

Then they were away, above the trees, high in the air, gaining speed each moment, leaving the knot of Martians far behind.

“Toward Marsport,” Jan said to Erick. “Right?”

Erick nodded. “Yes. We’ll land outside the field, in the hills. We can change back to our regular clothing there, our commercial clothing. Damn it — we’ll be lucky if we can get there in time for the ship.”

“The last ship,” Mara whispered, her chest rising and falling. “What if we don’t get there in time?”

Erick looked down at the leather case in his lap. “We’ll have to get there,” he murmured. “We must!”

For a long time there was silence. Thacher stared at Erickson. The older man was leaning back in his chair, sipping a little of his drink. Mara and Jan were silent.

"So you didn't destroy the City," Thacher said. "You didn't destroy it at all. You shrank it down and put it in a glass globe, in a paperweight. And now you're salesmen again, with a sample case of office supplies!"

Erickson smiled. He opened the briefcase and reaching into it he brought out the glass globe paperweight. He held it up, looking into it. "Yes, we stole the City from the Martians. That's how we got by the lie detector. It was true that we knew nothing about a *destroyed* City."

"But why?" Thacher said. "Why steal a City? Why not merely bomb it?"

"Ransom," Mara said fervently, gazing into the globe, her dark eyes bright. "Their biggest City, half of the Council — in Erick's hand!"

"Mars will have to do what Terra asks," Erickson said. "Now Terra will be able to make her commercial demands felt. Maybe there won't even be a war. Perhaps Terra will get her way without fighting." Still smiling, he put the globe back into the briefcase and locked it.

"Quite a story," Thacher said. "What an amazing process, reduction of size — A whole City reduced to microscopic dimensions. Amazing. No wonder you were able to escape. With such daring as that, no one could hope to stop you."

He looked down at the briefcase on the floor. Underneath them the jets murmured and vibrated evenly, as the ship moved through space toward distant Terra.

"We still have quite a way to go," Jan said. "You've heard our story, Thacher. Why not tell us yours? What sort of line are you in? What's your

business?”

“Yes,” Mara said. “What do you do?”

“What do I do?” Thacher said. “Well, if you like, I’ll show you.” He reached into his coat and brought out something. Something that flashed and glinted, somethig slender. A rod of pale fire.

The three stared at it. Sickened shock settled over them slowly.

Thacher held the rod loosely, calmly, pointing it at Erickson. “We knew you three were on this ship,” he said. “There was not doubt of that. But we did not know what had become of the City. My theory was that the City had not been destroyed at all, that something else had happened to it. Council instruments measured a sudden loss of mass in that area, a decrease equal to the mass of the City. Somehow the City had been spirited away, not destroyed. But I could not convince the other Council Leiters of it. I had to follow you alone.”

Thacher turned a little, nodding to the men sitting at the bar. The men rose at once, coming toward the table.

“A very interesting process you have. Mars will benefit a great deal from it. Perhaps it will even turn the tide in our favor. When we return to Marsport I wish to begin work on it at once. And now, if you will please pass me the briefcase —”

The Short Happy Life of the Brown Oxford

“I have something to show you,” Doc Labyrinth said. From his coat pocket he gravely drew forth a matchbox. He held the matchbox tightly, his eyes fixed on it. “You’re about to see the most momentous thing in all modern science. The world will shake and shudder.”

“Let me see,” I said. It was late, past midnight. Outside my house rain was falling on the deserted streets. I watched Doc Labyrinth as he carefully pushed the matchbox open with his thumb, just a crack. I leaned over to see.

There was a brass button in the matchbox. It was alone, except for a bit of dried grass and what looked like a bread crumb.

“Buttons have already been invented,” I said. “I don’t see much to this.” I reached out my hand to touch the button but Labyrinth jerked the box away, frowning furiously.

“This isn’t just a button,” he said. Looking down at the button he said, “Go on! Go on!” He nudged the button with his finger. “Go on!”

I watched with curiosity. “Labyrinth, I wish you’d explain. You come here in the middle of the night, show me a button in a matchbox, and —”

Labyrinth settled back against the couch, sagging with defeat. He closed the matchbox and resignedly put it back in his pocket. “It’s no use pretending,” he said. “I’ve failed. The button is dead. There’s no hope.”

“Is that so unusual? What did you expect?”

“Bring me something.” Labyrinth gazed hopelessly around the room. “Bring me — bring me *wine.*”

“All right, Doc,” I said getting up. “But you know what wine does to people.” I went into the kitchen and poured two glasses of sherry. I brought them back and gave one to him. We sipped for a time. “I wish you’d let me in on this.”

Doc put his glass down, nodding absently. He crossed his legs and took out his pipe. After he had lit his pipe he carefully looked once more into the matchbox. He sighed and put it away again.

“No use,” he said. “The Animator will never work, the Principle itself is wrong. I refer to the Principle of Sufficient Irritation, of course.”

“And what is that?”

“The Principle came to me this way. One day I was sitting on a rock at the beach. The sun was shining and it was very hot. I was perspiring and quite uncomfortable. All at once a pebble next to me got up and crawled off. The heat of the sun had annoyed it.”

“Really? A pebble?”

“At once the realization of the Principle of Sufficient Irritation came to me. Here was the origin of life. Eons ago, in the remote past, a bit of inanimate matter had become so irritated by something that it crawled away, moved by indignation. Here was my life work: to discover the perfect irritant, annoying enough to bring inanimate matter to life, and to incorporate it into a workable machine. The machine, which is at present in the back seat of my car, is called The Animator. But it doesn’t work.”

We were silent for a time. I felt my eyes slowly begin to close. “Say, Doc,” I began, “isn’t it time we —”

Doc Labyrinth leaped abruptly to his feet. “You’re right,” he said. “It’s time for me to go. I’ll leave.”

He headed for the door. I caught up with him. “About the machine,” I said. “Don’t give up hope. Maybe you’ll get it to work some other time.”

“The machine?” He frowned. “Oh, the Animator. Well, I’ll tell you what, I’ll sell it to you for five dollars.”

I gaped. There was something so forlorn about him that I didn’t feel like laughing. “For how much?” I said.

“I’ll bring it inside the house. Wait here.” He went outside, down the steps and up the dark sidewalk. I heard him open the car door, and then grunt and mutter.

“Hold on,” I said. I hurried after him. He was struggling with a bulky square box, trying to get it out of the car. I caught hold of one side, and together we lugged it into the house. We set it down on the dining table.

“So this is the Animator,” I said. “It looks like a Dutch oven.”

“It is, or it was. The Animator throws out a heat beam as an irritant. But I’m through with it forever.”

I took out my wallet. “All right. If you want to sell it, I might as well be the one who buys it.” I gave him the money and he took it. He showed me where to put in the inanimate matter, how to adjust the dials and meters, and without any warning, he put on his hat and left.

I was alone, with my new Animator. While I was looking at it my wife came downstairs in her bathrobe.

“What’s going on?” she said. “Look at you, your shoes are soaked. Were you outside in the gutter?”

“Not quite. Look at this oven. I just paid five dollars for it. It animates things.”

Joan stared down at my shoes. “It’s one o’clock in the morning. You put your shoes in the oven and come to bed.”

“But don’t you realize —”

“Get those shoes in the oven,” Joan said, going back upstairs again. “Do you hear me?”

“All right,” I said.

It was at breakfast, while I was sitting staring moodily down at a plate of cold eggs and bacon, that he came back. The doorbell commenced to ring furiously.

“Who can that be?” Joan said. I got up and went down the hall, into the living room. I opened the door.

“Labyrinth!” I said. His face was pale, and there were dark circles under his eyes.

“Here’s your five dollars,” he said. “I want my Animator back.”

I was dazed. “All right, Doc. Come on in and I’ll get it.”

He came inside and stood, tapping his foot. I went over and got the Animator. It was still warm. Labyrinth watched me carrying it toward him. “Set it down,” he said. “I want to make sure it’s all right.”

I put it on the table and the Doc went over it lovingly, carefully, opening the little door and peering inside. “There’s a shoe in it,” he said.

“There should be two shoes,” I said, suddenly remembering last night. “My God, I put my shoes in it.”

“Both of them? There’s only one now.”

Joan came from the kitchen. “Hello, Doctor,” she said. “What brings you out so early?”

Labyrinth and I were staring at each other. “Only one?” I said. I bent down to look. Inside was a single muddy shoe, quite dry, now, after its night in Labyrinth’s Animator. A single shoe — but I had put two in. Where was the other?

I turned around but the expression on Joan’s face made me forget what I was going to say. She was staring in horror at the floor, her mouth open.

Something small and brown was moving, sliding toward the couch. It went under the couch and disappeared. I had seen only a glimpse of it, a momentary flash of motion, but I knew what it was.

“My God,” Labyrinth said. “Here, take the five dollars.” He pushed the bill into my hands. “I really want it back, now!”

“Take it easy,” I said. “Give me a hand. We have to catch the damn thing before it gets outdoors.”

Labyrinth went over and shut the door to the living room. “It went under the couch.” He squatted down and peered under. “I think I see it. Do you have a stick or something?”

“Let me out of here,” Joan said. “I don’t want to have anything to do with this.”

“You can’t leave,” I said. I yanked down a curtain rod from the window and pulled the curtain from it. “We can use this.” I joined Labyrinth on the floor. “I’ll get it out, but you’ll have to help me catch it. If we don’t work fast we’ll never see it again.”

I nudged the shoe with the end of the rod. The shoe retreated, squeezing itself back toward the wall. I could see it, a small mound of brown, huddled and silent, like some wild animal at bay, escaped from its cage. It gave me an odd feeling.

“I wonder what we can do with it?” I murmured. “Where the hell are we going to keep it?”

“Could we put it in the desk drawer?” Joan said, looking around. “I’ll take the stationery out.”

“There it goes!” Labyrinth scrambled to his feet. The shoe had come out, fast. It went across the room, heading for the big chair. Before it could get underneath, Labyrinth caught hold of one of its laces. The shoe pulled and tugged, struggling to get free, but the old Doc had a firm hold of it.

Together we got the shoe into the desk and closed the drawer. We breathed a sigh of relief.

“That’s that,” Labyrinth said. He grinned foolishly at us. “Do you see what this means? We’ve done it, we’ve really done it! The Animator worked. But I wonder why it didn’t work with the button.”

“The button was brass,” I said. “And the shoe was hide and animal glue. A natural. And it was wet.”

We looked toward the drawer. “In that desk,” Labyrinth said, “is the most momentous thing in modern science.”

“The world will shake and shudder,” I finished. “I know. Well, you can consider it yours.” I took hold of Joan’s hand. “I give you the shoe along with your Animator.”

“Fine.” Labyrinth nodded. “Keep watch here, don’t let it get away.” He went to the front door. “I must get the proper people, men who will —”

“Can’t you take it with you?” Joan said nervously.

Labyrinth paused at the door. “You must watch over it. It is proof, proof the Animator works. The Principle of Sufficient Irritation.” He hurried down the walk.

“Well?” Joan said. “What now? Are you really going to stay here and watch over it?”

I looked at my watch. “I have to get to work.”

“Well, I’m not going to watch it. If you leave, I’m leaving with you. I won’t stay here.”

“It should be all right in the drawer,” I said. “I guess we could leave it for a while.”

“I’ll visit my family. I’ll meet you downtown this evening and we can come back home together.”

“Are you really that afraid of it?”

“I don’t like it. There’s something about it.”

“It’s only an old shoe.”

Joan smiled thinly. “Don’t kid me,” she said. “There never was another shoe like this.”

I met her downtown, after work that evening, and we had dinner. We drove home, and I parked the car in the driveway. We walked slowly up the

walk.

On the porch Joan paused. “Do we really have to go inside? Can’t we go to a movie or something?”

“We have to go in. I’m anxious to see how it is. I wonder what we’ll have to feed it.” I unlocked the door and pushed it open.

Something rushed past me, flying down the walk. It disappeared into the bushes.

“What was that?” Joan whispered, stricken.

“I can guess.” I hurried to the desk. Sure enough, the drawer was standing open. The shoe had kicked its way out. “Well, that’s that,” I said. “I wonder what we’re going to tell Doc?”

“Maybe you could catch it again,” Joan said. She closed the front door after us. “Or animate another. Try working on the other shoe, the one that’s left.”

I shook my head. “It didn’t respond. Creation is funny. Some things don’t react. Or maybe we could —”

The telephone rang. We looked at each other. There was something in the ring. “It’s him,” I said. I picked up the receiver.

“This is Labyrinth,” the familiar voice said. “I’ll be over early tomorrow. They’re coming with me. We’ll get photographs and a good write-up. Jenkins from the lab —”

“Look, Doc,” I began.

“I’ll talk later. I have a thousand things to do. We’ll see you tomorrow morning.” He clicked off.

“Was it the Doctor?” Joan said.

I looked at the empty desk drawer, hanging open. “It was. It was him, all right.” I went to the hall closet, taking my coat off. Suddenly I had an eerie feeling. I stopped, turning around. Something was watching me. But what? I saw nothing. It gave me the creeps.

“What the hell,” I said. I shrugged it off and hung my coat up. As I started back toward the living room I thought I saw something move, out of the corner of my eye.

“Damn,” I said.

“What is it?”

“Nothing. Nothing at all.” I looked all around me, but I could not pin anything down. There was the bookcase, the rugs, the pictures on the walls, everything as it always was. But something had moved.

I entered the living room. The Animator was sitting on the table. As I passed it I felt a surge of warmth. The Animator was still on, and the door was open! I snapped the switch off, and the dial light died. Had we left it on all day? I tried to remember, but I couldn’t be sure.

“We’ve got to find the shoe before nightfall,” I said.

We looked, but we found nothing. The two of us went over every inch of the yard, examining each bush, looking under the hedge, even under the house, but without any luck.

When it got too dark to see we turned on the porch light and worked for a time by it. At last I gave up. I went over and sat down on the porch steps.

“It’s no use,” I said. “Even in the hedge there are a million places. And while we’re beating one end, it could slip out the other. We’re licked. We might as well face it.”

“Maybe it’s just as well,” Joan said.

I stood up. “We’ll leave the front door open tonight. There’s a chance it might come back in.”

We left it open, but the next morning when we came downstairs the house was silent and empty. I knew at once the shoe was not there. I poked around, examining things. In the kitchen eggshells were strewn around the garbage pail. The shoe had come in during the night, but after helping itself it had left again.

I closed the front door and we stood silently, looking at each other. “He’ll be here any time,” I said. “I guess I better call the office and tell them I’ll be late.”

Joan touched the Animator. “So this is what did it. I wonder if it’ll ever happen again.”

We went outside and looked around hopefully for a time. Nothing stirred the bushes, nothing at all. “That’s that,” I said. I looked up. “Here comes a car, now.”

A dark Plymouth coasted up in front of the house. Two elderly men got out and came up the path toward us, studying us curiously.

“Where is Rupert?” one of them asked.

“Who? You mean Doc Labyrinth? I suppose he’ll be along any time.”

“Is it inside?” the man said. “I’m Porter, from the University. May I take a peek at it?”

“You’d better wait,” I said unhappily. “Wait until the Doc is here.”

Two more cars pulled up. More old men got out and started up the walk, murmuring and talking together. “Where’s the Animator?” one asked me, a codger with bushy whiskers. “Young man, direct us to the exhibit.”

“The exhibit is inside,” I said. “If you want to see the Animator, go on in.”

They crowded inside. Joan and I followed them. They were standing around the table, studying the square box, the Dutch oven, talking excitedly.

“This is it!” Porter said. “The Principle of Sufficient Irritation will go down in —”

“Nonsense,” another said. “It’s absurd. I want to see this hat, or shoe, or whatever it is.”

“You’ll see it,” Porter said. “Rupert knows what he’s doing. You can count on that.”

They fell into controversy, quoting authorities and citing dates and places. More cars were arriving, and some of them were press cars.

“Oh, God,” I said. “This will be the end of him.”

“Well, he’ll just have to tell them what happened,” Joan said. “About its getting away.”

“We’re going to, not him. We let the thing go.”

“I had nothing to do with it. I never liked that pair from the start. Don’t you remember, I wanted you to get those ox-blood ones?”

I ignored her. More and more old men were assembling on the lawn, standing around talking and discussing. All at once I saw Labyrinth's little blue Ford pull up, and my heart sank. He had come, he was here, and in a minute we would have to tell him.

"I can't face him," I said to Joan. "Let's slip out the back way."

At the sight of Doc Labyrinth all the scientists began streaming out of the house, surrounding him in a circle. Joan and I looked at each other. The house was deserted, except for the two of us. I closed the front door. Sounds of talk filtered through the windows; Labyrinth was expounding the Principle of Sufficient Irritation. In a moment he would come inside and demand the shoe.

"Well, it was his own fault for leaving it," Joan said. She picked up a magazine and thumbed through it.

Doc Labyrinth waved at me through the window. His old face was wreathed with smiles. I waved back halfheartedly. After a while I sat down beside Joan.

Time passed. I stared down at the floor. What was there to do? Nothing but wait, wait for the Doc to come triumphantly into the house, surrounded by scientists, learned men, reporters, historians, demanding the proof of his theory, the shoe. On my old shoe rested Labyrinth's whole life, the proof of his Principle, of the Animator, of everything.

And the damn shoe was gone, outside someplace!

"It won't be long now," I said.

We waited, without speaking. After a time I noticed a peculiar thing. The talk outside had died away. I listened, but I heard nothing.

“Well?” I said. “Why don’t they come in?”

The silence continued. What was going on? I stood up and went to the front door. I opened it and looked out.

“What’s the matter?” Joan said. “Can you see?”

“No,” I said. “I don’t get it.” They were all standing silently, staring down at something, none of them speaking. I was puzzled. I could not make sense out of it. “What’s happening?” I said.

“Let’s go and look.” Joan and I went slowly down the steps, onto the lawn. We pushed through the row of old men and made our way to the front.

“Good Lord,” I said. “Good Lord.”

Crossing the lawn was a strange little procession, making its way through the grass. Two shoes, my old brown shoe, and just ahead of it, leading the way, another shoe, a tiny white high-heeled slipper. I stared at it. I had seen it someplace before.

“That’s mine!” Joan cried. Everyone looked at her. “That belongs to me! My party shoes —”

“Not any more,” Labyrinth said. His old face was pale with emotion. “It is beyond us all, forever.”

“Amazing,” one of the learned men said. “Look at them. Observe the female. Look at what she is doing.”

The little white shoe was keeping carefully ahead of my old shoe, a few inches away, leading him coyly on. As my old shoe approached she backed away, moving in a half circle. The two shoes stopped for a moment, regarding each other. Then, all at once, my old shoe began to hop up and

down, first on his heel, then on his toe. Solemnly, with great dignity, the shoe danced around her, until he reached his starting point.

The little white shoe hopped once, and then she began again to move away, slowly, hesitantly, letting my shoe almost catch up to her before she went on.

"This implies a developed sense of mores," an old gentleman said. "Perhaps even a racial unconscious. The shoes are following a rigid pattern of ritual, probably laid down centuries —"

"Labyrinth, what does this mean?" Porter said. "Explain it to us."

"So that's what it was," I murmured. "While we were away the shoe got her out of the closet and used the Animator on her. I knew something was watching me, that night. She was still in the house."

"That's what he turned on the Animator for," Joan said. She sniffed. "I'm not sure I think much of it."

The two shoes had almost reached the hedge, the white slipper still just beyond the laces of the brown shoe. Labyrinth moved toward them.

"So, gentlemen, you can see that I did not exaggerate. This is the greatest moment in science, the creation of a new race. Perhaps, when mankind has fallen into ruin, society destroyed, this new life form —"

He started to reach for the shoes, but at that moment the lady shoe disappeared into the hedge, backing into the obscurity of the foliage. With one bound the brown shoe popped in after her. There was a rustling, then silence.

"I'm going indoors," Joan said, walking away.

“Gentlemen,” Labyrinth said, his face a little red, “this is incredible. We are witnessing one of the most profound and far-reaching moments of science.”

“Well, *almost* witnessing,” I said.

The Builder

“E.J. Elwood!” Liz said anxiously. “You aren’t listening to anything we’re saying. And you’re not eating a bit. What in the world is the matter with you? Sometimes I just can’t understand you.”

For a long time there was no response. Ernest Elwood continued to stare past them, staring out the window at the semi-darkness beyond, as if hearing something they did not hear. At last he sighed, drawing himself up in his chair, almost as if he were going to say something. But then his elbow knocked against his coffee cup and he turned instead to steady the cup, wiping spilled brown coffee from its side.

“Sorry,” he murmured. “What were you saying?”

“Eat, dear,” his wife said. She glanced at the two boys as she spoke to see if they had stopped eating also. “You know, I go to a great deal of trouble to fix your food.” Bob, the older boy, was going right ahead, cutting his liver and bacon carefully into bits. But sure enough, little Toddy had put down his knife and fork as soon as E.J. had, and now he, too, was sitting silently, staring down at his plate.

“See?” Liz said. “You’re not setting a very good example for the boys. Eat up your food. It’s getting cold. You don’t want to eat cold liver, do you? There’s nothing worse than liver when it gets cold and the fat all over the bacon hardens. It’s harder to digest cold fat than anything else in the world. Especially lamb fat. They say a lot of people can’t eat lamb fat at all. Dear, please eat.”

Elwood nodded. He lifted his fork and spooned up some peas and potatoes, carrying them to his mouth. Little Toddy did the same, gravely and seriously, a small edition of his father.

“Say,” Bob said. “We had an atomic bomb drill at school today. We lay under the desks.”

“Is that right?” Liz said.

“But Mr. Pearson our science teacher says that if they drop a bomb on us the whole town’ll be demolished, so I can’t see what good getting under the desk will do. I think they ought to realize what advances science has made. There are bombs now that’ll destroy miles, leaving nothing standing.”

“You sure know a lot,” Toddy muttered.

“Oh, shut up.”

“Boys,” Liz said.

“It’s true,” Bob said earnestly. “A fellow I know is in the Marine Corps Reserve and he says they have new weapons that will destroy wheat crops and poison water supplies. It’s some kind of crystals.”

“Heavens,” Liz said.

“They didn’t have things like that in the last war. Atomic development came almost at the end without there really being an opportunity to make use of it on a full scale.” Bob turned to his father. “Dad, isn’t that true? I’ll bet when you were in the Army you didn’t have any of the fully atomic —”

Elwood threw down his fork. He pushed his chair back and stood up. Liz stared up in astonishment at him, her cup half raised. Bob’s mouth hung open, his sentence unfinished. Little Toddy said nothing.

“Dear, what’s the matter?” Liz said.

“I’ll see you later.”

They gazed after him in amazement as he walked away from the table, out of the dining-room. They heard him go into the kitchen and pull open the back door. A moment later the back door slammed behind him.

“He went out in the back yard,” Bob said. “Mom, was he always like this? Why does he act so funny? It isn’t some kind of war psychosis he got in the Philippines, is it? In the First World War they called it shell shock, but now they know it’s a form of war psychosis. Is it something like that?”

“Eat your food,” Liz said, red spots of anger burning in her cheeks. She shook her head. “Darn that man. I just can’t imagine —”

The boys ate their food.

It was dark out in the back yard. The sun had set and the air was cool and thin, filled with dancing specks of night insects. In the next yard Joe Hunt was working, raking leaves from under his cherry tree. He nodded to Elwood.

Elwood walked slowly down the path, across the yard towards the garage. He stopped, his hands in his pockets. By the garage something immense and white loomed up, a vast pale shape in the evening gloom. As he stood gazing at it a kind of warmth began to glow inside him. It was a strange warmth, something like pride, a little pleasure mixed in, and — and excitement. Looking at the boat always made him excited. Even when he was first starting on it he had felt the sudden race of his heart, the shaking of his hands, sweat on his face.

His boat. He grinned, walking closer. He reached up and thumped the solid side. What a fine boat it was, and coming along damn well. Almost done. A lot of work had gone into that, a lot of work and time. Afternoons off from work, Sundays, and even sometimes early in the morning before work.

That was best, early in the morning, with the bright sun shining down and the air good-smelling and fresh, and everything wet and sparkling. He liked that time best of all, and there was no one else up to bother him and ask him questions. He thumped the solid side again. A lot of work and material, all right. Lumber and nails, sawing and hammering and bending. Of course, Toddy had helped him. He certainly couldn't have done it alone; no doubt of that. If Toddy hadn't drawn the lines on the board and —

"Hey," Joe Hunt said.

Elwood started, turning. Joe was leaning on the fence, looking at him. "Sorry," Elwood said. "What did you say?"

"Your mind was a million miles away," Hunt said. He took a puff on his cigar. "Nice night."

"Yes."

"That's some boat you got there, Elwood."

"Thanks," Elwood murmured. He walked away from it, back towards the house. "Goodnight, Joe."

"How long is it you've been working on that boat?" Hunt reflected. "Seems like about a year in all, doesn't it? About twelve months. You sure put a lot of time and effort into it. Seems like every time I see you you're carting lumber back here and sawing and hammering away."

Elwood nodded, moving towards the back door.

"You even got your kids working. At least, the little tyke. Yes, it's quite a boat." Hunt paused. "You sure must be going to go quite a way with it, by the size of it. Now just exactly where was it you told me you're going? I forget."

There was silence.

“I can’t hear you, Elwood,” Hunt said. “Speak up. A boat that big, you must be —”

“Layoff.”

Hunt laughed easily. “What’s the matter, Elwood? I’m just having a little harmless fun, pulling your leg. But seriously, where are you going with that? You going to drag it down to the beach and float it? I know a guy has a little sail-boat he fits on to a trailer cart, hooks it up to his car. He drives down to the yacht harbor every week or so. But my God, you can’t get that big thing on a trailer. You know, I heard about a guy built a boat in his cellar. Well, he got done and you know what he discovered? He discovered that the boat was so big when he tried to get it out the door —”

Liz Elwood came to the back door, snapping on the kitchen light and pushing the door open. She stepped out on to the grass, her arms folded.

“Good evening, Mrs. Elwood,” Hunt said, touching his hat. “Sure a nice night.”

“Good evening.” Liz turned to E.J. “For heaven’s sake, are you going to come in?” Her voice was low and hard.

“Sure.” Elwood reached out listlessly for the door. “I’m coming in. Goodnight, Joe.”

“Goodnight,” Hunt said. He watched the two of them go inside. The door closed, the light went off. Hunt shook his head. “Funny guy,” he murmured. “Getting funnier all the time. Like he’s in a different world. Him and his boat!”

He went indoors.

“She was just eighteen,” Jack Fredericks said, “but she sure knew what it was all about.”

“Those southern girls are that way,” Charlie said. “It’s like fruit, nice soft, ripe, slightly damp fruit.”

“There’s a passage in Hemingway like that,” Ann Pike said. “I can’t remember what it’s from. He compares a —”

“But the way they talk,” Charlie said. “Who can stand the way those southern girls talk?”

“What’s the matter with the way they talk?” Jack demanded. “They talk different, but you get used to it.”

“Why can’t they talk right?”

“What do you mean?”

“They talk like — colored people.”

“It’s because they all come from the same region,” Ann said.

“Are you saying this girl was colored?” Jack said.

“No, of course not. Finish your pie.” Charlie looked at his wristwatch. “Almost one. We have to be getting on back to the office.”

“I’m not finished eating,” Jack said. “Hold on!”

“You know, there’s a lot of colored people moving into my area,” Ann said. “There’s a real estate sign up on a house about a block from me. ‘All races welcomed.’ I almost fell over dead when I saw it.”

“What did you do?”

“I didn’t do anything. What can we do?”

“You know, if you work for the Government they can put a colored man or a Chinese next to you,” Jack said, “and you can’t do anything about it.”

“Except quit.”

“It interferes with your right to work,” Charlie said. “How can you work like that? Answer me.”

“There’s too many pinks in the Government,” Jack said. “That’s how they got that, about hiring people for Government jobs without looking to see what race they belong to. During WPA days, when Harry Hopkins was in.”

“You know where Harry Hopkins was born?” Ann said. “He was born in Russia.”

“That was Sidney Hillman,” Jack said.

“It’s all the same,” Charlie said. “They all ought to be sent back there.”

Ann looked curiously at Ernest Elwood. He was sitting quietly, reading his newspaper, not saying anything. The cafeteria was alive with movement and noise. Everyone was eating and talking, coming and going, back and forth.

“E.J., are you all right?” Ann said.

“Yes.”

“He’s reading about the White Sox,” Charlie said. “He has that intent look. Say, you know, I took my kids to the game the other night, and —”

“Come on,” Jack said, standing up. “We have to get back.”

They all rose. Elwood folded his newspaper up silently, putting it into his pocket.

“Say, you’re not talking much,” Charlie said to him as they went up the aisle. Elwood glanced up.

“Sorry.”

“I’ve been meaning to ask you something. Do you want to come over Saturday night for a little game? You haven’t played with us for a hell of a long time.”

“Don’t ask him,” Jack said, paying for his meal at the cash register. “He always wants to play queer games like deuces wild, baseball, spit in the ocean —”

“Straight poker for me,” Charlie said. “Come on, Elwood. The more the better. Have a couple of beers, chew the fat, get away from the wife, eh?” He grinned.

“One of these days we’re going to have a good old stag party,” Jack said, pocketing his change. He winked at Elwood. “You know the kind I mean? We get some gals together, have a little show —” He made a motion with his hand.

Elwood moved off. “Maybe. I’ll think it over.” He paid for his lunch. Then he went outside, out on to the bright pavement. The others were still inside, waiting for Ann. She had gone into the powder room.

Suddenly Elwood turned and walked hurriedly down the pavement, away from the cafeteria. He turned the corner quickly and found himself on Cedar Street, in front of a television store. Shoppers and clerks out on their

lunch hour pushed and crowded past him, laughing and talking, bits of their conversations rising and falling around him like waves of the sea. He stepped into the doorway of the television shop and stood, his hands in his pockets, like a man hiding from the rain.

What was the matter with him? Maybe he should go see a doctor. The sounds, the people, everything bothered him. Noise and motion everywhere. He wasn't sleeping enough at night. Maybe it was something in his diet. And he was working so damn hard out in the yard. By the time he went to bed at night he was exhausted. Elwood rubbed his forehead. People and sounds, talking, streaming past him, endless shapes moving in the streets and stores.

In the window of the television shop a big television set blinked and winked a soundless program, the images leaping merrily. Elwood watched passively. A woman in tights was doing acrobatics, first a series of splits, then cartwheels and spins. She walked on her hands for a moment, her legs waving above her, smiling at the audience. Then she disappeared and a brightly dressed man came on, leading a dog.

Elwood looked at his watch. Five minutes to one. He had five minutes to get back to the office. He went back to the pavement and looked around the corner. Ann and Charlie and Jack were no place to be seen. They had gone on. Elwood walked slowly along, past the stores, his hands in his pockets. He stopped for a moment in front of the ten cent store, watching the milling women pushing and shoving around the imitation jewelry counters, touching things, picking them up, examining them. In the window of a drugstore he stared at an advertisement for athlete's foot, some kind of a powder, being sprinkled between two cracked and blistered toes. He crossed the street.

On the other side he paused to look at a display of women's clothing, skirts and blouses and wool sweaters. In a color photograph a handsomely dressed girl was removing her blouse to show the world her elegant bra. Elwood passed on. The next window was suitcases, luggage and trunks.

Luggage. He stopped, frowning. Something wandered through his mind, some loose vague thought, too nebulous to catch. He felt, suddenly, a deep inner urgency. He examined his watch. Ten past one. He was late. He hurried to the corner and stood waiting impatiently for the light to change. A handful of men and women pressed past him, moving out to the curb to catch an oncoming bus. Elwood watched the bus. It halted, its doors opening. The people rushed on to it. Suddenly Elwood joined them, stepping up the steps of the bus. The doors closed behind him as he fished out change from his pocket.

A moment later he took his seat, next to an immense old woman with a child on her lap. Elwood sat quietly, his hands folded, staring ahead and waiting, as the bus moved off down the street, moving towards the residential district.

When he got home there was no one there. The house was dark and cool. He went to the bedroom and got his old clothes from the closet. He was just going out into the back yard when Liz appeared in the driveway, her arms loaded with groceries.

“E.J.!” she said. “What’s the matter? Why are you home?”

“I don’t know. I took some leave. It’s all right.”

Liz put her packages down on the fence. “For heaven’s sake,” she said irritably. “You frightened me.” She stared at him intently. “You took *leave?”*

“Yes.”

“How much does that make, this year? How much leave have you taken in all?”

“I don’t know.”

“You don’t know? Well, is there any left?”

“Left for what?”

Liz stared at him. Then she picked up her packages and went inside the house, the back door banging after her. Elwood frowned. What was the matter? He went on into the garage and began to drag lumber and tools out on to the lawn, beside the boat.

He gazed up at it. It was square, big and square, like some enormous solid packing crate. Lord, but it was solid. He had put endless beams into it. There was a covered cabin with a big window, the roof tarred over. Quite a boat.

He began to work. Presently Liz came out of the house. She crossed the yard silently, so that he did not notice her until he came to get some large nails.

“Well?” Liz said.

Elwood stopped for a moment. “What is it?”

Liz folded her arms.

Elwood became impatient. “What is it? Why are you looking at me?”

“Did you really take more leave? I can’t believe it. You really came home again to work on — on that.”

Elwood turned away.

“Wait.” She came up beside him. “Don’t walk off from me. Stand still.”

“Be quiet. Don’t shout.”

“I’m not shouting. I want to talk to you. I want to ask you something. May I? May I ask you something? You don’t mind talking to me?”

Elwood nodded.

“Why?” Liz said, her voice low and intense. “Why? Will you tell me that? Why?”

“Why what?”

“That. That-that thing. What is it for? Why are you here in the yard in the middle of the day? For a whole year it’s been like this. At the table last night, all of a sudden you got up and walked out. Why? What’s it all for?”

“It’s almost done,” Elwood murmured. “A few more licks here and there and it’ll be —”

“And then what?” Liz came around in front of him, standing in his path. “And then what? What are you going to do with it? Sell it? Float it? All the neighbors are laughing at you. Everybody in the block knows —” Her voice broke suddenly. “— Knows about you, and this. The kids at school make fun of Bob and Toddy. They tell them their father is — That he’s —”

“That he’s crazy?”

“Please, E.J. Tell me what it’s for. Will you do that? Maybe I can understand. You never told me. Wouldn’t it help? Can’t you even do that?”

“I can’t,” Elwood said.

“You can’t! Why not?”

“Because I don’t know,” Elwood said. “I don’t know what it’s for. Maybe it isn’t for anything.”

“But if it isn’t for anything why do you work on it?”

“I don’t know. I like to work on it. Maybe it’s like whittling.” He waved his hand impatiently. “I’ve always had a workshop of some kind. When I was a kid I used to build model airplanes. I have tools. I’ve always had tools.”

“But why do you come home in the middle of the day?”

“I get restless.”

“Why?”

“I — I hear people talking, and it makes me uneasy. I want to get away from them. There’s something about it all, about them. Their ways. Maybe I have claustrophobia.”

“Shall I call Doctor Evans and make an appointment?”

“No. No, I’m all right. Please, Liz, get out of the way so I can work. I want to finish.”

“And you don’t even know what it’s for.” She shook her head. “So all this time you’ve been working without knowing why. Like some animal that goes out at night and fights, like a cat on the back fence. You leave your work and us to —”

“Get out of the way.”

“Listen to me. You put down that hammer and come inside. You’re putting your suit on and going right back to the office. Do you hear? If you don’t I’m never going to let you inside the house again. You can break

down the door if you want, with your hammer. But it'll be locked for you from now on, if you don't forget that boat and go back to work."

There was silence.

"Get out of the way," Elwood said. "I have to finish."

Liz stared at him. "You're going on?" The man pushed past her. "You're going to go ahead? There's something wrong with you. Something wrong with your mind. You're —"

"Stop," Elwood said, looking past her. Liz turned.

Toddy was standing silently in the driveway, his lunch pail under his arms. His small face was grave and solemn. He did not say anything to them.

"Tod!" Liz said. "Is it that late already?"

Toddy came across the grass to his father. "Hello, boy," Elwood said. "How was school?"

"Fine."

"I'm going in the house," Liz said. "I meant it, E.J. Remember that I meant it."

She went up the walk. The back door slammed behind her.

Elwood sighed. He sat down on the ladder leading up the side of the boat and put his hammer down. He lit a cigarette and smoked silently. Toddy waiting without speaking.

"Well, boy?" Elwood said at last. "What do you say?"

“What do you want done, Dad?”

“Done?” Elwood smiled. “Well, there’s not too much left. A few things here and there. We’ll be through, soon. You might look around for boards we didn’t nail down on the deck.” He rubbed his jaw. “Almost done. We’ve been working a long time. You could paint, if you want. I want to get the cabin painted. Red, I think. How would red be?”

“Green.”

“Green? All right. There’s some green porch paint in the garage. Do you want to start stirring it up?”

“Sure,” Toddy said. He headed towards the garage.

Elwood watched him go. “Toddy —”

The boy turned. “Yes?”

“Toddy, wait.” Elwood went slowly towards him. “I want to ask you something.”

“What is it, Dad?”

“You — you don’t mind helping me, do you? You don’t mind working on the boat?”

Toddy looked up gravely into his father’s face. He said nothing. For a long time the two of them gazed at each other.

“Okay!” Elwood said suddenly. “You run along and get the paint started.”

Bob came swinging along the driveway with two of the kids from the junior high school. “Hi, Dad,” Bob called, grinning. “Say, how’s it coming?”

“Fine,” Elwood said.

“Look,” Bob said to his pals, pointing to the boat. “You see that? You know what that is?”

“What is it?” one of them said.

Bob opened the kitchen door. “That’s an atomic powered sub.” He grinned, and the two boys grinned. “It’s full of Uranium 235. Dad’s going all the way to Russia with it. When he gets through, there won’t be a thing left of Moscow.”

The boys went inside, the door slamming behind them.

Elwood stood looking up at the boat. In the next yard Mrs. Hunt stopped for a moment with taking down her washing, looking at him and the big square hull rising above him.

“Is it really atomic powered, Mr. Elwood?” she said.

“No.”

“What makes it run, then? I don’t see any sails. What kind of motor is in it? Steam?”

Elwood bit his lip. Strangely, he had never thought of that part. There was no motor in it, no motor at all. There were no sails, no boiler. He had put no engine into it, no turbines, no fuel. Nothing. It was a wood hull, an immense box, and that was all. He had never thought of what would make it go, never in all the time he and Toddy had worked on it.

Suddenly a torrent of despair descended over him. There was no engine, nothing. It was not a boat, it was only a great mass of wood and tar and nails. It would never go, never never leave the yard. Liz was right: he was like some animal going out into the yard at night, to fight and kill in the darkness, to struggle dimly, without sight or understanding, equally blind, equally pathetic.

What had he built it for? He did not know. Where was it going? He did not know that either. What would make it run? How would he get it out of the yard? What was it all for, to build without understanding, darkly, like a creature in the night?

Toddy had worked alongside him, the whole time. Why had *he* worked? Did he know? Did the boy know what the boat was for, why they were building? Toddy had never asked because he trusted his father to know.

But he did not know. He, the father, he did not know either, and soon it would be done, finished, ready. And then what? Soon Toddy would lay down his paint brush, cover the last can of paint, put away the nails, the scraps of wood, hang the saw and hammer up in the garage again. And *then* he would ask, ask the question he had never asked before but which must come finally.

And he could not answer him.

Elwood stood, staring up at it, the great hulk they had built, struggling to understand. Why had he worked? What was it all for? When would he know? Would he *ever* know? For an endless time he stood there, staring up.

It was not until the first great black drops of rain began to splash about him that he understood.

Meddler

They entered the great chamber. At the far end, technicians hovered around an immense illuminated board, following a complex pattern of lights that shifted rapidly, flashing through seemingly endless combinations. At long tables machines whirred — computers, human-operated and robot. Wall-charts covered every inch of vertical space. Hasten gazed around him in amazement.

Wood laughed. “Come over here and I’ll really show you something. You recognize *this,* don’t you?” He pointed to a hulking machine surrounded by silent men and women in white lab robes.

“I recognize it,” Hasten said slowly. “It’s something like our own Dip, but perhaps twenty times larger. What do you haul up? And *when* do you haul?” He fingered the surface-plate of the Dip, then squatted down, peering into the maw. The maw was locked shut; the Dip was in operation. “You know, if we had any idea this existed, Histo-Research would have —”

“You know now.” Wood bent down beside him. “Listen. Hasten, you’re the first man from outside the Department ever to get into this room. You saw the guards. No one gets in here unauthorized; the guards have orders to kill anyone trying to enter illegally.”

“To hide this? A machine? You’d shoot to —”

They stood, Wood facing him, his jaw hard. “*Your* Dip digs back into antiquity. Rome. Greece. Dust and old volumes.” Wood touched the big Dip beside them. “This Dip is different. We guard it with our lives, and anyone else’s lives; do you know why?”

Hasten stared at it.

“This Dip is set, not for antiquity, but — for the future.” Wood looked directly into Hasten’s face. “Do you understand? The future.”

“You’re dredging the future? But you can’t! It’s forbidden by law; you know that!” Hasten drew back. “If the Executive Council knew this they’d break this building apart. You know the dangers. Berkowsky himself demonstrated them in his original thesis.”

Hasten paced angrily. “I can’t understand you, using a future oriented Dip. When you pull material from the future you automatically introduce new factors into the present; the future is altered — you start a never-ending shift. The more you dip the more new factors are brought in. You create unstable conditions for centuries to come. That’s why the law was passed.”

Wood nodded. “I know.”

“And you still keep dipping?” Hasten gestured at the machine and the technicians. “Stop, for God’s sake! Stop before you introduce some lethal element that can’t be erased. Why do you keep —”

Wood sagged suddenly. “All right, Hasten, don’t lecture us. It’s too late; it’s already happened. A lethal factor was introduced in our first experiments. We thought we knew what we were doing…” He looked up. “And that’s why you were brought here. Sit down — you’re going to hear all about it.”

They faced each other across the desk. Wood folded his hands. “I’m going to put it straight on the line. You are considered an expert, *the* expert at Histo-Research. You know more about using a Time Dip than anyone alive; that’s why you’ve been shown our work, our illegal work.”

“And you’ve already got into trouble?”

“Plenty of trouble, and every attempt to meddle further makes it that much worse. Unless we do something, we’ll be the most culpable

organization in history."

"Please start at the beginning," Hasten said.

"The Dip was authorized by the Political Science Council; they wanted to know the results of some of their decisions. At first we objected, giving Berkowsky's theory; but the idea is hypnotic, you know. We gave in, and the Dip was built — secretly, of course.

"We made our first dredge about one year hence. To protect ourselves against Berkowsky's factor we tried a subterfuge; we actually brought nothing back. This Dip is geared to pick up nothing. No object is scooped; it merely photographs from a high altitude. The film comes back to us and we make enlargements and try to gestalt the conditions.

"Results were all right, at first. No more wars, cities growing, much better looking. Blow-ups of street scenes show many people, well-content, apparently. Pace a little slower.

"Then we went ahead fifty years. Even better: cities on the decrease. People not so dependent on machines. More grass, parks. Same general conditions, peace, happiness, much leisure. Less frenetic waste, hurry.

"We went on, skipping ahead. Of course, with such an indirect viewing method we couldn't be certain of anything, but it all looked fine. We relayed our information to the Council and they went ahead with their planning. And then it happened."

"What, exactly?" Hasten said, leaning forward.

"We decided to revisit a period we had already photographed, about a hundred years hence. We sent out the Dip, got it back with a full reel. The men developed it and we watched the run." Wood paused.

"And?"

“And it wasn’t the same. It was different. Everything was changed. War — war and destruction everywhere.” Wood shuddered. “We were appalled; we sent the Dip back at once to make absolutely certain.”

“And what did you find this time?”

Wood’s fists clenched. “Changed again, and for worse! Ruins, vast ruins. People poking around. Ruin and death everywhere. Slag. The *end* of war, the last phase.”

“I see,” Hasten said, nodding.

“That’s not the worst! We conveyed the news to the Council. It ceased all activity and went into a two-week conference; it canceled all ordinances and withdrew every plan formed on the basis of our reports. It was a month before the Council got in touch with us again. The members wanted us to try once more, take one more Dip to the same period. We said no, but they insisted. It could be no worse, they argued.

“So we sent the Dip out again. It came back and we ran the film. Hasten, there are things worse than war. You wouldn’t believe what we saw. There was no human life; none at all, not a single human being.”

“Everything was destroyed?”

“No! No destruction, cities big and stately, roads, buildings, lakes, fields. But no human life; the cities empty, functioning mechanically, every machine and wire untouched. But no living people.”

“What was it?”

“We sent the Dip on ahead, at fifty year leaps. Nothing. Nothing each time. Cities, roads, buildings, but no human life. Everyone dead. Plague,

radiation, or what, we don’t know. But *something* killed them. Where did it come from? We don’t know. It wasn’t there at first, not in our original dips.

“Somehow, *we* introduced it, the lethal factor. *We* brought it, with our meddling. It wasn’t there when we started; it was done by us, Hasten.” Wood stared at him, his face a white mask. “We brought it and now we’ve got to find what it is and get rid of it.”

“How are you going to do that?”

“We’ve built a Time Car, capable of carrying one human observer into the future. We’re sending a man there to see what it is. Photographs don’t tell us enough; we have to know more! When did it first appear? How? What were the first signs? *What is it?* Once we know, maybe we can eliminate it, the factor, trace it down and remove it. Someone must go into the future and find out what it was we began. It’s the only way.”

Woods stood up, and Hasten rose, too.

“You’re that person,” Wood said. “You’re going, the most competent person available. The Time Car is outside, in an open square, carefully guarded.” Wood gave a signal. Two soldiers came toward the desk.

“Sir?”

“Come with us,” Wood said. “We’re going outside to the square; make sure no one follows after us.” He turned to Hasten. “Ready?”

Hasten hesitated. “Wait a minute. I’ll have to go over your work, study what’s been done. Examine the Time Car itself. I can’t —”

The two soldiers moved closer, looking to Wood. Wood put his hand on Hasten’s shoulder. “I’m sorry,” he said, “we have no time to waste; come along with me.”

All around him blackness moved, swirling toward him and then receding. He sat down on the stool before the bank of controls, wiping the perspiration from his face. He was on his way, for better or worse. Briefly, Wood had outlined the operation of the Time Car. A few moments of instruction, the controls set for him, and then the metal door slammed behind him.

Hasten looked around him. It was cold in the sphere; the air was thin and chilly. He watched the moving dials for a while, but presently the cold began to make him uncomfortable. He went over to the equipment-locker and slid the door back. A jacket, a heavy jacket, and a flash gun. He held the gun for a minute, studying it. And tools, all kinds of tools and equipment. He was just putting the gun away when the dull chugging under him suddenly ceased. For one terrible second he was floating, drifting aimlessly, then the feeling was gone.

Sunlight flowed through the window, spreading out over the floor. He snapped the artificial lights off and went to the window to see. Wood had set the controls for a hundred years hence; bracing himself, he looked out.

A meadow, flowers and grass, rolling off into the distance. Blue sky and ‘ wandering clouds. Some animals grazed a long way off, standing together in the shade of a tree. He went to the door and unlocked it, stepping out. Warmy sunlight struck him, and he felt better at once. Now he could see the animal were cows.

He stood for a long time at the door, his hands on his hips. Could the plague have been bacterial? Air-carried? If it *were* a plague. He reached feeling the protective helmet on his shoulders. Better to keep it on.

He went back and got the gun from the locker. Then he returned to the lip of the sphere, checked the door-lock to be certain it would remain closed during his absence. Only then, Hasten stepped down onto the grass of the meadow. He closed the door and looked around him. Presently he began to walk quickly away from the sphere, toward the top of a long hill that

stretched out half a mile away. As he strode along, he examined the click-band on his wrist which would guide him back to the metal sphere, the Time Car, if he could not find the way himself.

He came to the cows, passing by their tree. The cows got up and moved away from him. He noticed something that gave him a sudden chill; their udders were small and wrinkled. Not herd cows.

When he reached the top of the hill he stopped, lifting his glasses from his waist. The earth fell away, mile after mile of it, dry green fields without pattern or design, rolling like waves as far as the eye could see. Nothing else? He turned, sweeping the horizon.

He stiffened, adjusting the sight. Far off to the left, at the very limit of vision, the vague perpendiculars of a city rose up. He lowered the glasses and hitched up his heavy boots. Then he walked down the other side of the hill, taking big steps; he had a long way to go.

Hasten had not walked more than half an hour when he saw butterflies. They rose up suddenly a few yards in front of him, dancing and fluttering in the sunlight. He stopped to rest, watching them. They were all colors, red and blue, with splashes of yellow and green. They were the largest butterflies he had ever seen. Perhaps they had come from some zoo, escaped and bred wild after man left the scene. The butterflies rose higher and higher in the air. They took no notice of him but struck out toward the distant spires of the city; in a moment they were gone.

Hasten started up again. It was hard to imagine the death of man in such circumstances, butterflies and grass and cows in the shade. What a quiet and lovely world was left, without the human race!

Suddenly one last butterfly fluttered up, almost in his face, rising quickly from the grass. He put his arm up automatically, batting at it. The butterfly dashed against his hand. He began to laugh —

Pain made him sick; he fell half to his knees, gasping and retching. He rolled over on his face, hunching himself up, burying his face in the ground.

His arm ached, and pain knotted him up; his head swam and he closed his eyes.

When Hasten turned over at last, the butterfly was gone; it had not lingered.

He lay for a time in the grass, then he sat up slowly, getting shakily to his feet. He stripped off his shirt and examined his hand and wrist. The flesh was black, hard and already swelling. He glanced down at it and then at the distant city. The butterflies had gone there…

He made his way back to the Time Car.

Hasten reached the sphere a little after the sun had begun to drop into evening darkness. The door slid back to his touch and he stepped inside. He dressed his hand and arm with salve from the medicine kit and then sat down on the stool, deep in thought, staring at his arm. A small sting, accidental, in fact. The butterfly had not even noticed. Suppose the whole pack —

He waited until the sun had completely set and it was pitch black outside the sphere. At night all the bees and butterflies disappeared; or at least, those he knew did. Well, he would have to take a chance. His arm still ached dully, throbbing without respite. The salve had done no good; he felt dizzy, and there was a fever taste in his mouth.

Before he went out he opened the locker and brought all the things out. He examined the flash gun but put it aside. A moment later he found what he wanted. A blowtorch, and a flashlight. He put all the other things back and stood up. Now he was ready — if that were the word for it. As ready as he would ever be.

He stepped out into the darkness, flashing the light ahead of him. He walked quickly. It was a dark and lonely night; only a few stars shone above him, and his was the only earthly light. He passed up the hill and down the

other side. A grove of trees loomed up, and then he was on a level plain, feeling his way toward the city by the beam of the flashlight.

When he reached the city he was very tired. He had gone a long way, and his breath was beginning to come hard. Huge ghostly outlines rose up ahead of him, disappearing above, vanishing into darkness. It was not a large city, apparently, but its design was strange to Hasten, more vertical and slim than he was used to.

He went through the gate. Grass was growing from the stone pavement of the streets. He stopped, looking down. Grass and weeds everywhere; and in the corners, by the buildings were bones, little heaps of bones and dust. He walked on, flashing his light against the sides of the slender buildings. His footsteps echoed hollowly. There was no light except his own.

The buildings began to thin out. Soon he found himself entering a great tangled square, overgrown with bushes and vines. At the far end a building larger than the others rose. He walked toward it, across the empty, desolate square, flashing his light from side to side. He walked up a half-buried step and onto a concrete plaza. All at once he stopped. To his right, another building reared up, catching his attention. His heart thudded. Above the doorway his light made out a word cut expertly into the arch:

Bibliotheca

This was what he wanted, the library. He went up the steps toward the dark entrance. Wood boards gave under his feet. He reached the entrance and found himself facing a heavy wood door with metal handles. When he took hold of the handles the door fell toward him, crashing past him, down the steps and into the darkness. The odor of decay and dust choked him.

He went inside. Spider webs brushed against his helmet as he passed along silent halls. He chose a room at random and entered it. Here were more heaps of dust and gray bits of bones. Low tables and shelves ran along the walls. He went to the shelves and took down a handful of books. They powdered and broke in his hands, showering bits of paper and thread onto him. Had only a century passed since his own time?

Hasten sat down at one of the tables and opened one of the books that was in better condition. The words were no language he knew, a Romance language that he knew must be artificial. He turned page after page. At last he took a handful of books at random and moved back toward the door. Suddenly his heart jumped. He went over to the wall, his hands trembling. Newspapers.

He took the brittle, cracking sheets carefully down, holding them to the light. The same language, of course. Bold, black headlines. He managed to roll some of the papers together and add them to his load of books. Then he went through the door, out into the corridor, back the way he had come.

When he stepped out onto the steps cold fresh air struck him, tingling his nose. He looked around at the dim outlines rising up on all sides of the square. Then he walked down and across the square, feeling his way carefully along. He came to the gate of the city, and a moment later he was outside, on the flat plain again, heading back toward the Time Car.

For an endless time he walked, his head bent down, plodding along. Finally fatigue made him stop, swaying back and forth, breathing deeply. He set down his load and looked around him. Far off, at the edge of the horizon, a long streak of gray had appeared, silently coming into existence while he was walking. Dawn. The sun coming up.

A cold wind moved through the air, eddying against him. In the forming gray light the trees and hills were beginning to take shape, a hard, unbending outline. He turned toward the city. Bleak and thin, the shafts of the deserted buildings stuck up. For a moment he watched, fascinated by the first color of day as it struck the shafts and towers. Then the color faded, and a drifting mist moved between him and the city. All at once he bent down and grabbed up his load. He began to walk, hurrying as best he could, chill fear moving through him.

From the city a black speck had leaped up into the sky and was hovering over it.

After a time, a long time, Hasten looked back. The speck was still there — but it had grown. And it was no longer black; in the clear light of day the speck was beginning to flash, shining with many colors.

He increased his pace; he went down the side of a hill and up another. For a second he paused to snap on his click-band. It spoke loudly; he was not far from the sphere. He waved his arm and the clicks rose and fell. To the right. Wiping the perspiration from his hands he went on.

A few minutes later he looked down from the top of a ridge and saw a gleaming metal sphere resting silently on the grass, dripping with cold dew from the night. The Time Car; sliding and running, he leaped down the hill toward it.

He was just pushing the door open with his shoulder when the first cloud of butterflies appeared at the top of the hill, moving quietly toward him.

He locked the door and set his armload down, flexing his muscles. His hand ached, burning now with an intense pain. He had no time for that — he hurried to the window and peered out. The butterflies were swarming toward the sphere, darting and dancing above him, flashing with color. They began to settle down onto the metal, even onto the window. Abruptly, his gaze was cut off by gleaming bodies, soft and pulpy, their beating wings mashed together. He listened. He could hear them, a muffled, echoing sound that came from all sides of him. The interior of the sphere dimmed into darkness as the butterflies sealed off the window. He lit the artificial lights.

Time passed. He examined the newspapers, uncertain of what to do. Go back? Or ahead? Better jump ahead fifty years or so. The butterflies were dangerous, but perhaps not the real thing, the lethal factor that he was looking for. He looked at his hand. The skin was black and hard, a dead area was increasing. A faint shadow of worry went through him; it was getting worse, not better.

The scratching sound on all sides of him began to annoy him, filling him with an uneasy restlessness. He put down the books and paced back and forth. How could insects, even immense insects such as these, destroy the human race? Surely human beings could combat them. Dusts, poisons, sprays.

A bit of metal, a little particle drifted down onto his sleeve. He brushed it off. A second particle fell, and then some tiny fragments. He leaped, his head jerking up.

A circle was forming above his head. Another circle appeared to the right of it, and then a third. All around him circles were forming in the walls and roof of the sphere. He ran to the control board and closed the safety switch. The board hummed into life. He began to set the indicator panel, working rapidly, frantically. Now pieces of metal were dropping down, a rain of metal fragments onto the floor. Corrosive, some kind of substance exuded from them. Acid? Natural secretion of some sort. A large piece of metal fell; he turned.

Into the sphere the butterflies came, fluttering and dancing toward him. The piece that had fallen was a circle of metal, cut cleanly through. He did not have time even to notice it; he snatched up the blowtorch and snapped it on. The flame sucked and gurgled. As the butterflies came toward him he pressed the handle and held the spout up. The air burst alive with burning particles that rained down all over him, and a furious odor reeked through the sphere.

He closed the last switches. The indicator lights flickered, the floor chugged under him. He threw the main lever. More butterflies were pushing in, crowding each other eagerly, struggling to get through. A second circle of metal crashed to the floor suddenly, emitting a new horde. Hasten cringed, backing away, the blowtorch up, spouting flame. The butterflies came on, more and more of them.

Then sudden silence settled over everything, a quiet so abrupt that he blinked. The endless, insistent scratching had ceased. He was alone, except for a cloud of ashes and particles over the floor and walls, the remains of the butterflies that had got into the sphere. Hasten sat down on the stool, trembling, he was safe, on his way back to his own time; and there was no doubt, no possible doubt that he had found the lethal factor. It was there, in the heap of ashes on the floor, in the circles neatly cut in the hull of the car. Corrosive secretion? He smiled grimly.

His last vision of them, of the swelling horde had told him what he wanted to know. Clutched carefully against the first butterflies through the circles were tools, tiny cutting tools. They had cut their way in, bored through; they had come carrying their own equipment.

He sat down, waiting for the Time Car to complete its journey.

Department guards caught hold of him, helping him from the Car. He stepped down unsteadily, leaning against them. “Thanks,” he murmured.

Wood hurried up. “Hasten, you’re all right?”

He nodded. “Yes. Except my hand.”

“Let’s get inside at once.” They went through the door, into the great chamber. “Sit down.” Wood waved his hand impatiently, and a soldier hurried a chair over. “Get him some hot coffee.”

Coffee was brought. Hasten sat sipping. At last he pushed the cup away and leaned back.

“Can you tell us now?” Wood asked.

“Yes.”

“Fine.” Wood sat down across from him. A tape recorder whirred into life and a camera began to photograph Hasten’s face as he talked. “Go on. What did you find?”

When he had finished the room was silent. None of the guards or technicians spoke.

Wood stood up, trembling. “God. So it’s a form of toxic life that got them. I thought it was something like that. But butterflies? And intelligent. Planning attacks. Probably rapid breeding, quick adaptation.”

“Maybe the books and newspapers will help us.”

“But where did they come from? Mutation of some existing form? Or from some other planet. Maybe space travel brought them in. We’ve got to find out.”

“They attacked only human beings,” Hasten said. “They left the cows. Just people.”

“Maybe we can stop them.” Wood snapped on the vidphone. “I’ll have the Council convene an emergency session. We’ll give them your description and recommendations. We’ll start a program, organize units all over the planet. Now that we know what it is, we have a chance. Thanks to you, Hasten, maybe we can stop them in time!”

The operator appeared and Wood gave the Council’s code letter. Hasten watched dully. At last he got to his feet and wandered around the room. His arm throbbed unmercifully. Presently he went back outside, through the doorway into the open square. Some soldiers were examining the Time Car curiously. Hasten watched them without feeling, his mind blank.

“What is it, sir?” one asked.

“That?” Hasten roused himself, going slowly over. “That’s a Time Car.”

“No, I mean this.” The soldier pointed to something on the hull. “This, sir; it wasn’t on there when the Car went out.”

Hasten’s heart stopped beating. He pushed past them, staring up. At first he saw nothing on the metal hull, only the corroded metal surface. Then chill fright rushed through him.

Something small and brown and furry was there, on the surface. He reached out, touching it. A sack, a stiff little brown sack. It was dry, dry and empty. There was nothing in it; it was open at one end. He stared up. All across the hull of the Car were little brown sacks, some still full, but most of them already empty.

Cocoons.

Paycheck

All at once he was in motion. Around him smooth jets hummed. He was on a small private rocket cruiser, moving leisurely across the afternoon sky, between cities.

"Ugh!" he said, sitting up in his seat and rubbing his head. Beside him Earl Rethrick was staring keenly at him, his eyes bright.

"Coming around?"

"Where are we?" Jennings shook his head, trying to clear the dull ache. "Or maybe I should ask that a different way." Already, he could see that it was not late fall. It was spring. Below the cruiser the fields were green. The last thing he remembered was stepping into an elevator with Rethrick. And it was late fall. And in New York.

"Yes," Rethrick said. "It's almost two years later. You'll find a lot of things have changed. The Government fell a few months ago. The new Government is even stronger. The SP, Security Police, have almost unlimited power. They're teaching the schoolchildren to inform, now. But we all saw that coming. Let's see, what else? New York is larger. I understand they've finished filling in San Francisco Bay."

"What I want to know is what the hell I've been doing the last two years!" Jennings lit a cigarette nervously, pressing the strike end. "Will you tell me that?"

"No. Of course I won't tell you that."

"Where are we going?"

"Back to the New York Office. Where you first met me. Remember? You probably remember it better than I. After all, it was just a day or so ago

for you.”

Jennings nodded. Two years! Two years out of his life, gone forever. It didn’t seem possible. He had still been considering, debating, when he stepped into the elevator. Should he change his mind? Even if he were getting that much money — and it was a lot, even for him — it didn’t really seem worth it. He would always wonder what work he had been doing. Was it legal? Was it — But that was past speculation, now. Even while he was trying to make up his mind the curtain had fallen. He looked ruefully out the window at the afternoon sky. Below, the earth was moist and alive. Spring, spring two years later. And what did he have to show for the two years?

“Have I been paid?” he asked. He slipped his wallet out and glanced into it. “Apparently not.”

“No. You’ll be paid at the Office. Kelly will pay you.”

“The whole works at once?”

“Fifty thousand credits.”

Jennings smiled. He felt a little better, now that the sum had been spoken aloud. Maybe it wasn’t so bad, after all. Almost like being paid to sleep. But he was two years older; he had just that much less to live. It was like selling part of himself, part of his life. And life was worth plenty, these days. He shrugged. Anyhow, it was in the past.

“We’re almost there,” the older man said. The robot pilot dropped the cruiser down, sinking toward the ground. The edge of New York City became visible below them. “Well, Jennings, I may never see you again.” He held out his hand. “It’s been a pleasure working with you. We did work together, you know. Side by side. You’re one of the best mechanics I’ve ever seen. We were right in hiring you, even at that salary. You paid us back many times — although you don’t realize it.”

“I’m glad you got your money’s worth.”

“You sound angry.”

“No. I’m just trying to get used to the idea of being two years older.”

Rethrick laughed. “You’re still a very young man. And you’ll feel better when she gives you your pay.”

They stepped out onto the tiny rooftop field of the New York office building. Rethrick led him over to an elevator. As the doors slid shut Jennings got a mental shock. This was the last thing he remembered, this elevator. After that he had blacked out.

“Kelly will be glad to see you,” Rethrick said, as they came out into a lighted hall. “She asks about you, once in a while.”

“Why?”

“She says you’re good-looking.” Rethrick pushed a code key against a door. The door responded, swinging wide. They entered the luxurious office of Rethrick Construction. Behind a long mahogany desk a young woman was sitting, studying a report.

“Kelly,” Rethrick said, “look whose time finally expired.”

The girl looked up, smiling. “Hello, Mr. Jennings. How does it feel to be back in the world?”

“Fine.” Jennings walked over to her. “Rethrick says you’re the paymaster.”

Rethrick clapped Jennings on the back. “So long, my friend. I’ll go back to the plant. If you ever need a lot of money in a hurry come around and

we’ll work out another contract with you.”

Jennings nodded. As Rethrick went back out he sat down beside the desk, crossing his legs. Kelly slid a drawer open, moving her chair back. “All right. Your time is up, so Rethrick Construction is ready to pay. Do you have your copy of the contract?”

Jennings took an envelope from his pocket and tossed it on the desk. “There it is.”

Kelly removed a small cloth sack and some sheets of handwritten paper from the desk drawer. For a time she read over the sheets, her small face intent.

“What is it?”

“I think you’re going to be surprised.” Kelly handed him his contract back. “Read that over again.”

“Why?” Jennings unfastened the envelope.

“There’s an alternate clause. ‘If the party of the second part so desires, at any time during his time of contract to the aforesaid Rethrick Construction Company —’ “

” ‘If he so desires, instead of the monetary sum specified, he may choose instead, according to his own wish, articles or products which, in his own opinion, are of sufficient value to stand in lieu of the sum —’ “

Jennings snatched up the cloth sack, pulling it open. He poured the contents into his palm. Kelly watched.

“Where’s Rethrick?” Jennings stood up. “If he has an idea that this —”

“Rethrick has nothing to do with it. It was your own request. Here, look at this.” Kelly passed him the sheets of paper. “In your own hand. Read them. It was your idea, not ours. Honest.” She smiled up at him. “This happens every once in a while with people we take on contract. During their time they decide to take something else instead of money. Why, I don’t know. But they come out with their minds clean, having agreed —”

Jennings scanned the pages. It was his own writing. There was no doubt of it. His hands shook. “I can’t believe it. Even if it is my own writing.” He folded up the paper, his jaw set. “Something was done to me while I was back there. I never would have agreed to this.”

“You must have had a reason. I admit it doesn’t make sense. But you don’t know what factors might have persuaded you, before your mind was cleaned. You aren’t the first. There have been several others before you.”

Jennings stared down at what he held in his palm. From the cloth sack he had spilled a little assortment of items. A code key. A ticket stub. A parcel receipt. A length of fine wire. Haifa poker chip, broken across. A green strip of cloth. A bus token.

“This, instead of fifty thousand credits,” he murmured. “Two years…”

He went out of the building, onto the busy afternoon street. He was still dazed, dazed and confused. Had he been swindled? He felt in his pocket for the little trinkets, the wire, the ticket stub, all the rest. *That*, for two years of work! But he had seen his own handwriting, the statement of waiver, the request for the substitution. Like Jack and the Beanstalk. Why? What for? What had made him do it?

He turned, starting down the sidewalk. At the corner he stopped for a surface cruiser that was turning.

“All right, Jennings. Get in.”

His head jerked up. The door of the cruiser was open. A man was kneeling, pointing a heat-rifle straight at his face. A man in blue-green. The Security Police.

Jennings got in. The door closed, magnetic locks slipping into place behind him. Like a vault. The cruiser glided off down the street. Jennings sank back against the seat. Beside him the SP man lowered his gun. On the other side a second officer ran his hands expertly over him, searching for weapons. He brought out Jenning's wallet and the handful of trinkets. The envelope and contract.

"What does he have?" the driver said.

"Wallet, money. Contract with Rethrick Construction. No weapons." He gave Jennings back his things.

"What's this all about?" Jennings said.

"We want to ask you a few questions. That's all. You've been working for Rethrick?"

"Yes."

"Two years?"

"Almost two years."

"At the Plant?"

Jennings nodded. "I suppose so."

The officer leaned toward him. "Where is that Plant, Mr. Jennings. Where is it located?"

“I don’t know.”

The two officers looked at each other. The first one moistened his lips, his face sharp and alert. “You don’t know? The next question. The last. In those two years, what kind of work did you do? What was your job?”

“Mechanic. I repaired electronic machinery.”

“What *kind* of electronic machinery?”

“I don’t know.” Jennings looked up at him. He could not help smiling, his lips twisting ironically. “I’m sorry, but I don’t know. It’s the truth.”

There was silence.

“What do you mean, you don’t know? You mean you worked on machinery for two years without knowing what it was? Without even knowing where you were?”

Jennings roused himself. “What is all this? What did you pick me up for? I haven’t done anything. I’ve been —”

“We know. We’re not arresting you. We only want to get information for our records. About Rethrick Construction. You’ve been working for them, in their Plant. In an important capacity. You’re an electronic mechanic?”

“Yes.”

“You repair high-quality computers and allied equipment?” The officer consulted his notebook. “You’re considered one of the best in the country, according to this.”

Jennings said nothing.

“Tell us the two things we want to know, and you’ll be released at once. Where is Rethrick’s Plant? What kind of work are they doing? You serviced their machines for them, didn’t you? Isn’t that right? For two years.”

“I don’t know. I suppose so. I don’t have any idea what I did during the two years. You can believe me or not.” Jennings stared wearily down at the floor.

“What’ll we do?” the driver said finally. “We have no instructions past this.”

“Take him to the station. We can’t do any more questioning here.” Beyond the cruiser, men and women hurried along the sidewalk. The streets were choked with cruisers, workers going to their homes in the country.

“Jennings, why don’t you answer us? What’s the matter with you? There’s no reason why you can’t tell us a couple of simple things like that. Don’t you want to cooperate with your Government? Why should you conceal information from us?”

“I’d tell you if I knew.”

The officer grunted. No one spoke. Presently the cruiser drew up before a great stone building. The driver turned the motor off, removing the control cap and putting it in his pocket. He touched the door with a code key, releasing the magnetic lock.

“What shall we do, take him in? Actually, we don’t —”

“Wait.” The driver stepped out. The other two went with him, closing and locking the doors behind them. They stood on the pavement before the Security Station, talking.

Jennings sat silently, staring down at the floor. The SP wanted to know about Rethrick Construction. Well, there was nothing he could tell them. They had come to the wrong person, but how could he prove that? The whole thing was impossible. Two years wiped clean from his mind. Who would believe him? It seemed unbelievable to him, too.

His mind wandered, back to when he had first read the ad. It had hit home, hit him direct. *Mechanic wanted,* and a general outline of the work, vague, indirect, but enough to tell him that it was right up his line. And the pay! Interviews at the Office. Tests, forms. And then the gradual realization that Rethrick Construction was finding all about him while he knew nothing about them. What kind of work did they do? Construction, but what kind? What sort of machines did they have? Fifty thousand credits for two years…

And he had come out with his mind washed clean. Two years, and he remembered nothing. It took him a long time to agree to that part of the contract. But he *had* agreed.

Jennings looked out the window. The three officers were still talking on the sidewalk, trying to decide what to do with him. He was in a tough spot. They wanted information he couldn't give, information he didn't know. But how could he prove it? How could he prove that he had worked two years and come out knowing no more than when he had gone in! The SP would work him over. It would be a long time before they'd believe him, and by that time —

He glanced quickly around. Was there any escape? In a second they would be back. He touched the door. Locked, the triple-ring magnetic locks. He had worked on magnetic locks many times. He had even designed part of a trigger core. There was no way to open the doors without the right code key. No way, unless by some chance he could short out the lock. But with what?

He felt in his pockets. What could he use? If he could short the locks, blow them out, there was a faint chance. Outside, men and women were swarming by, on their way home from work. It was past five; the great

office buildings were shutting down, the streets were alive with traffic. If he once got out they wouldn't dare fire. If he could get out.

The three officers separated. One went up the steps into the Station building. In a second the others would reenter the cruiser. Jennings dug into his pocket, bringing out the code key, the ticket stub, the wire. The wire! Thin wire, thin as human hair. Was it insulated? He unwound it quickly. No.

He knelt down, running his fingers expertly across the surface of the door. At the edge of the lock was a thin line, a groove between the lock and the door. He brought the end of the wire up to it, delicately maneuvering the wire into the almost invisible space. The wire disappeared an inch or so. Sweat rolled down Jennings' forehead. He moved the wire a fraction of an inch, twisting it. He held his breath. The relay should be —

A flash.

Half blinded, he threw his weight against the door. The door fell open, the lock fused and smoking. Jennings tumbled into the street and leaped to his feet. Cruisers were all around him, honking and sweeping past. He ducked behind a lumbering truck, entering the middle lane of traffic. On the sidewalk he caught a momentary glimpse of the SP men starting after him.

A bus came along, swaying from side to side, loaded with shoppers and workers. Jennings caught hold of the back rail, pulling himself up onto the platform. Astonished faces loomed up, pale moons thrust suddenly at him. The robot conductor was coming toward him, whirring angrily.

"Sir —" the conductor began. The bus was slowing down. "Sir, it is not allowed —"

"It's all right," Jennings said. He was filled, all at once, with a strange elation. A moment ago he had been trapped, with no way to escape. Two years of his life had been lost for nothing. The Security Police had arrested him, demanding information he couldn't give. A hopeless situation! But now things were beginning to click in his mind.

He reached into his pocket and brought out the bus token. He put it calmly into the conductor’s coin slot.

“Okay?” he said. Under his feet the bus wavered, the driver hesitating. Then the bus resumed pace, going on. The conductor turned away, its whirrs subsiding. Everything was all right. Jennings smiled. He eased past the standing people, looking for a seat, some place to sit down. Where he could think.

He had plenty to think about. His mind was racing.

The bus moved on, flowing with the restless stream of urban traffic. Jennings only half saw the people sitting around him. There was no doubt of it: he had not been swindled. It was on the level. The decision had actually been his. Amazingly, after two years of work he had preferred a handful of trinkets instead of fifty thousand credits. But more amazingly, the handful of trinkets were turning out to be worth more than the money.

With a piece of wire and a bus token he had escaped from the Security Police. That was worth plenty. Money would have been useless to him once he disappeared inside the great stone Station. Even fifty thousand credits wouldn’t have helped him. And there were five trinkets left. He felt around in his pocket. Five more things. He had used two. The others — what were they for? Something as important?

But the big puzzle: how had *he* — his earlier self — known that a piece of wire and a bus token would save his life?” *He* had known, all right. Known in advance. But how? And the other five. Probably they were just as precious, or would be.

The *he* of those two years had known things that he did not know now, things that had been washed away when the company cleaned his mind. Like an adding machine which had been cleared. Everything was slate-clean. What *he* had known was gone, now. Gone, except for seven trinkets, five of which were still in his pocket.

But the real problem right now was not a problem of speculation. It was very concrete. The Security Police were looking for him. They had his name and description. There was no use thinking of going to his apartment — if he even still had an apartment. But where, then? Hotels? The SP combed them daily. Friends? That would mean putting them in jeopardy, along with him. It was only a question of time before the SP found him, walking along the street, eating in a restaurant, in a show, sleeping in some rooming house. The SP were everywhere.

Everywhere? Not quite. When an individual person was defenseless, a business was not. The big economic forces had managed to remain free, although virtually everything else had been absorbed by the Government. Laws that had been eased away from the private person still protected property and industry. The SP could pick up any given person, but they could not enter and seize a company, a business. That had been clearly established in the middle of the twentieth century.

Business, industry, corporations, were safe from the Security Police. Due process was required. Rethrick Construction was a target of SP interest, but they could do nothing until some statute was violated. If he could get back to the Company, get inside its doors, he would be safe. Jennings smiled grimly. The modern church, sanctuary. It was the Government against the corporation, rather than the State against the Church. The new Notre Dame of the world. Where the law could not follow.

Would Rethrick take him back? Yes, on the old basis. He had already said so. Another two years sliced from him, and then back onto the streets. Would that help him? He felt suddenly in his pocket. And there were the remaining trinkets. Surely *he* had intended them to be used! No, he could not go back to Rethrick and work another contract time. Something else was indicated. Something more permanent. Jennings pondered. Rethrick Construction. What did it construct? What had *he* known, found out, during those two years? And why were the SP so interested?

He brought out the five objects and studied them. The green strip of cloth. The code key. The ticket stub. The parcel receipt. The half poker chip. Strange, that little things like that could be important.

And Rethrick Construction was involved.

There was no doubt. The answer, all the answers, lay at Rethrick. But where *was* Rethrick? He had no idea where the plant was, no idea at all. He knew where the Office was, the big, luxurious room with the young woman and her desk. But that was not Rethrick Construction. Did anyone know, beside Rethrick? Kelly didn't know. Did the SP know?

It was out of town. That was certain. He had gone there by rocket. It was probably in the United States, maybe in the farmlands, the country, between cities. What a hell of a situation! Any moment the SP might pick him up. The next time he might not get away. His only chance, his own real chance for safety, lay in reaching Rethrick. And his only chance to find out the things he had to know. The plant — a place where he had been, but which he could not recall. He looked down at the five trinkets. Would any of them help?

A burst of despair swept through him. Maybe it was just coincidence, the wire and the token. Maybe —

He examined the parcel receipt, turning it over and holding it up to the light. Suddenly his stomach muscles knotted. His pulse changed. He had been right. No, it was not a coincidence, the wire and the token. The parcel receipt was dated two days hence. The parcel, whatever it might be, had not even been deposited yet. Not for forty-eight more hours.

He looked at the other things. The ticket stub. What good was a ticket stub? It was creased and bent, folded over, again and again. He couldn't go anyplace with that. A stub didn't take you anywhere. It only told you where you had been.

Where you had been!

He bent down, peering at it, smoothing the creases. The printing had been torn through the middle. Only part of each word could be made out.

PORTOLA T

STUARTSVI

IOW

He smiled. That was it. Where he had been. He could fill in the missing letters. It was enough. There was no doubt: *he had* foreseen this, too. Three of the seven trinkets used. Four left. Stuartsville, Iowa. Was there such a place? He looked out the window of the bus. The Intercity rocket station was only a block or so away. He could be there in a second. A quick sprint from the bus, hoping the Police wouldn't be there to stop him —

But somehow he knew they wouldn't. Not with the other four things in his pocket. And once he was on the rocket he would be safe. Intercity was big, big enough to keep free of the SP. Jennings put the remaining trinkets back into his pocket and stood up, pulling the bellcord.

A moment later he stepped gingerly out onto the sidewalk.

The rocket let him off at the edge of town, at a tiny brown field. A few disinterested porters moved about, stacking luggage, resting from the heat of the sun.

Jennings crossed the field to the waiting room, studying the people around him. Ordinary people, workmen, businessmen, housewives. Stuartsville was a small middle Western town. Truck drivers. High school kids.

He went through the waiting room, out onto the street. So this was where Rethrick's Plant was located — perhaps. If he had used the stub correctly. Anyhow, *something* was here, or *he* wouldn't have included the stub with the other trinkets.

Stuartsville, Iowa. A faint plan was beginning to form in the back of his mind, still vague and nebulous. He began to walk, his hands in his pockets, looking around him. A newspaper office, lunch counters, hotels, poolrooms, a barber shop, a television repair shop. A rocket sales store with huge showrooms of gleaming rockets. Family size. And at the end of the block the Portola Theater.

The town thinned out. Farms, fields. Miles of green country. In the sky above a few transport rockets lumbered, carrying farm supplies and equipment back and forth. A small, unimportant town. Just right for Rethrick Construction. The Plant would be lost here, away from the city, away from the SP.

Jennings walked back. He entered a lunchroom, BOB'S PLACE. A young man with glasses came over as he sat down at the counter, wiping his hands on his white apron.

"Coffee," Jennings said.

"Coffee." The man brought the cup. There were only a few people in the lunchroom. A couple of flies buzzed, against the window.

Outside in the street shoppers and farmers moved leisurely by.

"Say," Jennings said, stirring his coffee. "Where can a man get work around here? Do you know?"

"What kind of work?" The young man came back, leaning against the counter.

"Electrical wiring. I'm an electrician. Television, rockets, computers. That sort of stuff."

"Why don't you try the big industrial areas? Detroit. Chicago. New York."

Jennings shook his head. “Can’t stand the big cities. I never liked cities.”

The young man laughed. “A lot of people here would be glad to work in Detroit. You’re an electrician?”

“Are there any plants around here? Any repair shops or plants?”

“None that I know of.” The young man went off to wait on some men that had come in. Jennings sipped his coffee. Had he made a mistake? Maybe he should go back and forget about Stuartsville, Iowa. Maybe he had made the wrong inference from the ticket stub. But the ticket meant something, unless he was completely wrong about everything. It was a little late to decide that, though.

The young man came back. “Is there *any* kind of work I can get here?” Jennings said. “Just to tide me over.”

“There’s always farm work.”

“How about the retail repair shops? Garages. TV.”

“There’s a TV repair shop down the street. Maybe you might get something there. You could try. Farm work pays good. They can’t get many men, anymore. Most men in the military. You want to pitch hay?”

Jennings laughed. He paid for his coffee. “Not very much. Thanks.”

“Once in a while some of the men go up the road and work. There’s some sort of Government station.”

Jennings nodded. He pushed the screen door open, stepping outside onto the hot sidewalk. He walked aimlessly for a time, deep in thought, turning

his nebulous plan over and over. It was a good plan; it would solve everything, all his problems at once. But right now it hinged on one thing: finding Rethrick Construction. And he had only one clue, if it really was a clue. The ticket stub, folded and creased, in his pocket. And a faith that *he* had known what he was doing.

A Government station. Jennings paused, looking around him. Across the street was a taxi stand, a couple of cabbies sitting in their cabs, smoking and reading the newspaper. It was worth a try, at least. There wasn't much else to do. Rethrick would be something else, on the surface. If it posed as a Government project no one would ask any questions. They were all too accustomed to Government projects working without explanation, in secrecy.

He went over to the first cab. "Mister," he said, "can you tell me something?"

The cabbie looked up. "What do you want?"

"They tell me there's work to be had, out at the Government station. Is that right?"

The cabbie studied him. He nodded.

"What kind of work is it?"

"I don't know."

"Where do they do the hiring?"

"I don't know." The cabbie lifted his paper.

"Thanks." Jennings turned away.

“They don’t do any hiring. Maybe once in a long while. They don’t take many on. You better go someplace else if you’re looking for work.”

“All right.”

The other cabbie leaned out of his cab. “They use only a few day laborers, buddy. That’s all. And they’re very choosy. They don’t hardly let anybody in. Some kind of war work.”

Jennings pricked up his ears. “Secret?”

“They come into town and pick up a load of construction workers. Maybe a truck full. That’s all. They’re real careful who they pick.”

Jennings walked back toward the cabbie. “That right?”

“It’s a big place. Steel wall. Charged. Guards. Work going on day and night. But nobody gets in. Set up on top of a hill, out the old Henderson Road. About two miles and a half.” The cabbie poked at his shoulder. “You can’t get in unless you’re identified. They identify their laborers, after they pick them out. You know.”

Jennings stared at him. The cabbie was tracing a line on his shoulder. Suddenly Jennings understood. A flood of relief rushed over him.

“Sure,” he said. “I understand what you mean. At least, I think so.” He reached into his pocket, bringing out the four trinkets. Carefully, he unfolded the strip of green cloth, holding it up. “Like this?”

The cabbies stared at the cloth. “That’s right,” one of them said slowly, staring at the cloth. “Where did you get it?”

Jennings laughed. “A friend.” He put the cloth back in his pocket. “A friend gave it to me.”

He went off, toward the Intercity field. He had plenty to do, now that the first step was over. Rethrick was here, all right. And apparently the trinkets were going to see him through. One for every crisis. A pocketful of miracles, from someone who knew the future!

But the next step couldn't be done alone. He needed help. Somebody else was needed for this part. But who? He pondered, entering the Intercity waiting room. There was only one person he could possibly go to. It was a long chance, but he had to take it. He couldn't work alone, here on out. If the Rethrick plant was here then Kelly would be too…

The street was dark. At the corner a lamppost cast a fitful beam. A few cruisers moved by.

From the apartment building entrance a slim shape came, a young woman in a coat, a purse in her hand. Jennings watched as she passed under the streetlamp. Kelly McVane was going someplace, probably to a party. Smartly dressed, high heels tap-tapping on the pavement, a little coat and hat.

He stepped out behind her. "Kelly."

She turned quickly, her mouth open. "Oh!"

Jennings took her arm. "Don't worry. It's just me. Where are you going, all dressed up?"

"No place." She blinked. "My golly, you scared me. What is it? What's going on?"

"Nothing. Can you spare a few minutes? I want to talk to you."

Kelly nodded. "I guess so." She looked around. "Where'll we go?"

“Where’s a place we can talk? I don’t want anyone to overhear us.”

“Can’t we just walk along?”

“No. The Police.”

“The Police?”

“They’re looking for me.”

“For you? But why?”

“Let’s not stand here,” Jennings said grimly. “Where can we go?”

Kelly hesitated. “We can go up to my apartment. No one’s there.”

They went up to the elevator. Kelly unlocked the door, pressing the code key against it. The door swung open and they went inside, the heater and lights coming on automatically at her step. She closed the door and took off her coat.

“I won’t stay long.” Jennings said.

“That’s all right. I’ll fix you a drink.” She went into the kitchen. Jennings sat down on the couch, looking around at the neat little apartment. Presently the girl came back. She sat down beside him and Jennings took his drink. Scotch and water, cold.

“Thanks.”

Kelly smiled. “Not at all.” The two of them sat silently for a time. “Well?” she said at last. “What’s this all about? Why are the Police looking for you?”

“They want to find out about Rethrick Construction. I’m only a pawn in this. They think I know something because I worked two years at Rethrick’s Plant.”

“But you don’t!”

“I can’t prove that.”

Kelly reached out, touching Jennings’ head, just above the ear. “Feel there. That spot.”

Jennings reached up. Above his ear, under the hair, was a tiny hard spot. “What is it?”

“They burned through the skull there. Cut a tiny wedge from the brain. All your memories of the two years. They located them and burned them out. The SP couldn’t possibly make you remember. It’s gone. You don’t have it.”

“By the time they realize that there won’t be much left of me.”

Kelly said nothing.

“You can see the spot I’m in. It would be better for me if I did remember. Then I could tell them and they’d —”

“And destroy Rethrick!”

Jennings shrugged. “Why not? Rethrick means nothing to me. I don’t even know what they’re doing. And why are the Police so interested? From the very start, all the secrecy, cleaning my mind —”

“There’s reason. Good reason.”

“Do you know why?”

“No.” Kelly shook her head. “But I’m sure there’s a reason. If the SP are interested, there’s reason.” She set down her drink, turning toward him. “I hate the Police. We all do, every one of us. They’re after us all the time. I don’t know anything about Rethrick. If I did my life wouldn’t be safe. There’s not much standing between Rethrick and them. A few laws, a handful of laws. Nothing more.”

“I have the feeling Rethrick is a great deal more than just another construction company the SP wants to control.”

“I suppose it is. I really don’t know. I’m just a receptionist. I’ve never been to the Plant. I don’t even know where it is.”

“But you wouldn’t want anything to happen to it.”

“Of course not! They’re fighting the Police. Anyone that’s fighting the Police is on our side.”

“Really? I’ve heard that kind of logic before. Anyone fighting communism was automatically good, a few decades ago. Well, time will tell. As far as I’m concerned I’m an individual caught between two ruthless forces. Government and business. The Government has men and wealth. Rethrick Construction has its technocracy. What they’ve done with it, I don’t know. I did, a few weeks ago. All I have now is a faint glimmer, a few references. A theory.”

Kelly glanced at him. “A theory?”

“And my pocketful of trinkets. Seven. Three or four now. I’ve used some. They’re the basis of my theory. If Rethrick is doing what I think it’s doing, I can understand the SP’s interest. As a matter of fact, I’m beginning to share their interest.”

“What is Rethrick doing?”

“It’s developed a time scoop.”

“What?”

“A time scoop. It’s been theoretically possible for several years. But it’s illegal to experiment with time scoops and mirrors. It’s a felony, and if you’re caught, all your equipment and data becomes the property of the Government.” Jennings smiled crookedly. “No wonder the Government’s interested. If they can catch Rethrick with the goods —”

“A time scoop. It’s hard to believe.”

“Don’t you think I’m right?”

“I don’t know. Perhaps. Your trinkets. You’re not the first to come out with a little cloth sack of odds and ends. You’ve used some? How?”

“First, the wire and the bus token. Getting away from the Police. It seems funny, but if I hadn’t had them, I’d be there yet. A piece of wire and a tencent token. But I don’t usually carry such things. That’s the point.”

“Time travel.”

“No. Not time travel. Berkowsky demonstrated that time travel is impossible. This is a time scoop, a mirror to see and a scoop to pick up things. These trinkets. At least one of them is from the future. Scooped up. Brought back.”

“How do you know?”

“It’s dated. The others, perhaps not. Things like tokens and wire belong to classes of things. Any one token is as good as another. There, *he must* have used a mirror.”

“He?”

“When I was working with Rethrick. I must have used the mirror. I looked into my own future. If I was repairing their equipment I could hardly keep from it! I must have looked ahead, seen what was coming. The SP picking me up. I must have seen that, and seen what a piece of thin wire and a bus token would do — if I had them with me at the exact moment.”

Kelly considered. “Well? What do you want me for?”

“I’m not sure, now. Do you really look on Rethrick as a benevolent institution, waging war against the Police? A sort of Roland at Roncesvalles —”

“What does it matter how I feel about the Company?”

“It matters a lot.” Jennings finished his drink, pushing the glass aside. “It matters a lot, because I want you to help me. I’m going to blackmail Rethrick Construction.”

Kelly stared at him.

“It’s my one chance to stay alive, I’ve got to get a hold over Rethrick, a big hold. Enough of a hold so they’ll let me in, on my own terms. There’s no other place I can go. Sooner or later the Police are going to pick me up. If I’m not inside the Plant, and soon —”

“Help you blackmail the Company? Destroy Rethrick?”

“No. Not destroy. I don’t want to destroy it — my life depends on the Company. My life depends on Rethrick being strong enough to defy the SP. But if I’m on the *outside* it doesn’t much matter how strong Rethrick is. Do you see? I want to get in. I want to get inside before it’s too late. And I want

in on my own terms, not as a two-year worker who gets pushed out again afterward."

"For the Police to pick up."

Jennings nodded. "Exactly."

"How are you going to blackmail the Company?"

"I'm going to enter the Plant and carry out enough material to prove Rethrick is operating a time scoop."

Kelly laughed. "Enter the Plant? Let's see you *find* the Plant. The SP have been looking for it for years."

"I've already found it." Jennings leaned back, lighting a cigarette. "I've located it with my trinkets. And I have four left, enough to get me inside, I think. And to get me what I want. I'll be able to carry out enough papers and photographs to hang Rethrick. But I don't want to hang Rethrick. I only want to bargain. That's where you come in."

"I?"

"You can be trusted not to go to the Police. I need someone I can turn the material over to. I don't dare keep it myself. As soon as I have it I must turn it over to someone else, someone who'll hide it where I won't be able to find it."

"Why?"

"Because," Jennings said calmly, "any minute the SP may pick me up. I have no love for Rethrick, but I don't want to scuttle it. That's why you've got to help me. I'm going to turn the information over to you, to hold, while I bargain with Rethrick. Otherwise I'll have to hold it myself. And if I have it on me —"

He glanced at her. Kelly was staring at the floor, her face tense. Set.

“Well? What do you say? Will you help me, or shall I take the chance the SP won’t pick me up with the material? Data enough to destroy Rethrick. Well? Which will it be? Do you want to see Rethrick destroyed? What’s your answer?”

The two of them crouched, looking across the fields at the hill beyond. The hill rose up, naked and brown, burned clean of vegetation. Nothing grew on its sides. Halfway up a long steel fence twisted, topped with charged barbed wire. On the other side a guard walked slowly, a tiny figure patrolling with a rifle and helmet.

At the top of the hill lay an enormous concrete block, a towering structure without windows or doors. Mounted guns caught the early morning sunlight, glinting in a row along the roof of the building.

“So that’s the Plant,” Kelly said softly.

“That’s it. It would take an army to get up there, up that hill and over the fence. Unless they were allowed in.” Jennings got to his feet, helping Kelly up. They walked back along the path, through the trees, to where Kelly had parked the cruiser.

“Do you really think your green cloth band will get you in?” Kelly said, sliding behind the wheel.

“According to the people in the town, a truckload of laborers will be brought in to the Plant sometime this morning. The truck is unloaded at the entrance and the men examined. If everything’s in order they’re let inside the grounds, past the fence. For construction work, manual labor. At the end of the day they’re let out again and driven back to town.”

“Will that get you close enough?”

“I’ll be on the other side of the fence, at least.”

“How will you get to the time scoop? That must be inside the building, some place.”

Jennings brought out a small code key. “This will get me in. I hope. I assume it will.”

Kelly took the key, examining it. “So that’s one of your trinkets. We should have taken a better look inside your little cloth bag.”

“We?”

“The Company. I saw several little bags of trinkets pass out, through my hands. Rethrick never said anything.”

“Probably the Company assumed no one would ever want to get back inside again.” Jennings took the code key from her. “Now, do you know what you’re supposed to do?”

“I’m supposed to stay here with the cruiser until you get back. You’re to give me the material. Then I’m to carry it back to New York and wait for you to contact me.”

“That’s right.” Jennings studied the distant road, leading through the trees to the Plant gate. “I better get down there. The truck may be along any time.”

“What if they decide to count the number of workers?”

“I’ll have to take the chance. But I’m not worried. I’m sure *he* foresaw everything.”

Kelly smiled. “You and your friend, your helpful friend. I hope *he* left you enough things to get you out again, after you have the photographs.”

“Do you?”

“Why not?” Kelly said easily. “I always liked you. You know that. You knew when you came to me.”

Jennings stepped out of the cruiser. He had on overalls and workshoes, and a gray sweatshirt. “I’ll see you later. If everything goes all right. I think it will.” He patted his pocket. “With my charms here, my good-luck charms.”

He went off through the trees, walking swiftly.

The trees led to the very edge of the road. He stayed with them, not coming out into the open. The Plant guards were certainly scanning the hillside. They had burned it clean, so that anyone trying to creep up to the fence would be spotted at once. And he had seen infrared searchlights.

Jennings crouched low, resting against his heels, watching the road. A few yards up the road was a roadblock, just ahead of the gate. He examined his watch. Ten thirty. He might have a wait, a long wait. He tried to relax.

It was after eleven when the great truck came down the road, rumbling and wheezing.

Jennings came to life. He took out the strip of green cloth and fastened it around his arm. The truck came closer. He could see its load now. The back was full of workmen, men in jeans and workshirts, bounced and jolted as the truck moved along. Sure enough, each had an arm band like his own, a swathe of green around his upper arm. So far so good.

The truck came slowly to a halt, stopping at the roadblock. The men got down slowly onto the road, sending up a cloud of dust into the hot midday sun. They slapped the dust from their jeans, some of them lighting cigarettes. Two guards came leisurely from behind the roadblock. Jennings tensed. In a moment it would be time. The guards moved among the men, examining them, their arm bands, their faces, looking at the identification tabs of a few.

The roadblock slid back. The gate opened. The guards returned to their positions.

Jennings slid forward, slithering through the brush, toward the road. The men were stamping out their cigarettes, climbing back up into the truck. The truck was gunning its motor, the driver releasing the brakes. Jennings dropped onto the road, behind the truck. A rattle of leaves and dirt showered after him. Where he had landed, the view of the guards was cut off by the truck. Jennings held his breath. He ran toward the back of the truck.

The men stared at him curiously as he pulled himself up among them, his chest rising and falling. Their faces were weathered, gray and lined. Men of the soil. Jennings took his place between two burly farmers as the truck started up. They did not seem to notice him. He had rubbed dirt into his skin, and let his beard grow for a day. A quick glance he didn’t look much different from the others. But if anyone made a count —

The truck passed through the gate, into the grounds. The gate slid shut behind. Now they were going up, up the steep side of the hill, the truck rattling and swaying from side to side. The vast concrete structure loomed nearer. Were they going to enter it? Jennings watched, fascinated. A thin high door was sliding back, revealing a dark interior. A row of artificial lights gleamed.

The truck stopped. The workmen began to get down again. Some mechanics came around them.

“What’s this crew for?” one of them asked.

“Digging. Inside.” Another jerked a thumb. “They’re digging again. Send them inside.”

Jennings’s heart thudded. He was going inside! He felt at his neck. There, inside the gray sweater, a flatplate camera hung like a bib around his neck. He could scarcely feel it, even knowing it was there. Maybe this would be less difficult than he had thought.

The workmen pushed through the door on foot, Jennings with them. They were in an immense workroom, long benches with half-completed machinery, booms and cranes, and the constant roar of work. The door closed after them, cutting them off from outside. He was in the Plant. But where was the time scoop, and the mirror?

“This way,” a foreman said. The workmen plodded over to the right. A freight lift rose to meet them from the bowels of the building. “You’re going down below. How many of you have experience with drills?”

A few hands went up.

“You can show the others. We are moving earth with drills and eaters. Any of you work eaters?”

No hands. Jennings glanced at the worktables. Had he worked here, not so long ago? A sudden chill went through him. Suppose he were recognized? Maybe he had worked with these very mechanics.

“Come on,” the foreman said impatiently. “Hurry up.”

Jennings got into the freight lift with the others. A moment later they began to descend, down the black tube. Down, down, into the lower levels of the Plant. Rethrick Construction was *big*, a lot bigger than it looked above ground. A lot bigger than he had imagined. Floors, underground levels, flashing past one after the other.

The elevator stopped. The doors opened. He was looking down a long corridor. The floor was thick with stone dust. The air was moist. Around him, the workmen began to crowd out. Suddenly Jennings stiffened, pulling back.

At the end of the corridor before a steel door, was Earl Rethrick. Talking to a group of technicians.

"All out," the foreman said. "Let's go."

Jennings left the elevator, keeping behind the others. Rethrick! His heart beat dully. If Rethrick saw him he was finished. He felt in his pockets. He had a miniature Boris gun, but it wouldn't be much use if he was discovered. Once Rethrick saw him it would be all over.

"Down this way." The foreman led them toward what seemed to be an underground railway, to one side of the corridor. The men were getting into metal cars along a track. Jennings watched Rethrick. He saw him gesture angrily, his voice coming faintly down the hall. Suddenly Rethrick turned. He held up his hand and the great steel door behind him opened.

Jennings's heart almost stopped beating.

There, beyond the steel door, was the time scoop. He recognized it at once. The mirror. The long metal rods, ending in claws. Like Berkowsky's theoretical model — only this was real.

Rethrick went into the room, the technicians following behind him. Men were working at the scoop, standing all around it. Part of the shield was off. They were digging into the works. Jennings stared, hanging back.

"Say you —" the foreman said, coming toward him. The steel door shut. The view was cut off. Rethrick, the scoop, the technicians, were gone.

“Sorry,” Jennings murmured.

“You know you’re not supposed to be curious around here.” The foreman was studying him intently. “I don’t remember you. Let me see your tab.”

“My tab?”

“Your identification tab.” The foreman turned away. “Bill, bring me the board.” He looked Jennings up and down. “I’m going to check you from the board, mister. I’ve never seen you in the crew before. Stay here.” A man was coming from a side door with a check board in his hands.

It was now or never.

Jennings sprinted, down the corridor, toward the great steel door. Behind there was a startled shout, the foreman and his helper. Jennings whipped out the code key, praying fervently as he ran. He came up to the door, holding out the key. With the other hand he brought out the Boris gun. Beyond the door was the time scoop. A few photographs, some schematics snatched up, and then, if he could get out —

The door did not move. Sweat leaped out on his face. He knocked the key against the door. Why didn’t it open? Surely — He began to shake, panic rising up in him. Down the corridor people were coming, racing after him. Open —

But the door did not open. The key he held in his hand was the wrong key.

He was defeated. The door and the key did not match. Either *he* had been wrong, or the key was to be used someplace else. But where? Jennings looked frantically around. Where? Where could he go?

To one side a door was half open, a regular bolt-lock door. He crossed the corridor, pushing it open. He was in a storeroom of some sort. He slammed the door, throwing the bolt. He could hear them outside, confused,

calling for guards. Soon armed guards would be along. Jennings held the Boris gun tightly, gazing around. Was he trapped? Was there a second way out?

He ran through the room, pushing among bales and boxes, towering stacks of silent cartons, end on end. At the rear was an emergency hatch. He opened it immediately. An impulse came to throw the code key away. What good had it been? But surely *he* had known what he was doing. *He* had already seen all this. Like God, it had already happened for *him.* Predetermined. *He* could not err. Or could he?

A chill went through him. Maybe the future was variable. Maybe this had been the right key, once. But not any more!

There were sounds behind him. They were melting the storeroom door. Jennings scrambled through the emergency hatch, into a low concrete passage, damp and ill lit. He ran quickly along it, turning corners. It was like a sewer. Other passages ran into it, from all sides.

He stopped. Which way? Where could he hide? The mouth of a major vent pipe gaped above his head. He caught hold and pulled himself up. Grimly, he eased his body onto it. They'd ignore a pipe, go on past. He crawled cautiously down the pipe. Warm air blew into his face. Why such a big vent? It implied an unusual chamber at the other end. He came to a metal grill and stopped.

And gasped.

He was looking into the great room, the room he had glimpsed beyond the steel door. Only now he was at the other end. There was the time scoop. And far down, beyond the scoop, was Rethrick, conferring at an active vidscreen. An alarm was sounding, whining shrilly, echoing everywhere. Technicians were running in all directions. Guards in uniform poured in and out of doors.

The scoop. Jennings examined the grill. It was slotted in place. He moved it laterally and it fell into his hands. No one was watching. He slid cautiously out, into the room, the Boris gun ready. He was fairly hidden behind the scoop, and the technicians and guards were all the way down at the other end of the room, where he had first seen them.

And there it was, all around him, the schematics, the mirror, papers, data, blueprints. He flicked his camera on. Against his chest the camera vibrated, film moving through it. He snatched up a handful of schematics. Perhaps *he* had used these very diagrams, a few weeks before!

He stuffed his pockets with papers. The film came to an end. But he was finished. He squeezed back into the vent, pushing through the mouth and down the tube. The sewerlike corridor was still empty, but there was an insistent drumming sound, the noise of voices and footsteps. So many passages — They were looking for him in a maze of escape corridors.

Jennings ran swiftly. He ran on and on, without regard to direction, trying to keep along the main corridor. On all sides passages flocked off, one after another, countless passages. He was dropping down, lower and lower. Running downhill.

Suddenly he stopped, gasping. The sound behind him had died away for a moment. But there was a new sound, ahead. He went along slowly. The corridor twisted, turning to the right. He advanced slowly, the Boris gun ready.

Two guards were standing a little way ahead, lounging and talking together. Beyond them was a heavy code door. And behind him the sound of voices were coming again, growing louder. They had found the same passage he had taken. They were on the way.

Jennings stepped out, the Boris gun raised. “Put up your hands. Let go of your guns.”

The guards gawked at him. Kids, boys with cropped blond hair and shiny uniforms. They moved back, pale and scared.

“The guns. Let them fall.”

The two rifles clattered down. Jennings smiled. Boys. Probably this was their first encounter with trouble. Their leather boots shone, brightly polished.

“Open the door,” Jennings said. “I want through.”

They stared at him. Behind, the noise grew.

“Open it.” He became impatient. “Come on.” He waved the pistol. “Open it, damn it! Do you want me to —”

“We — we can’t.”

“What?”

“We can’t. It’s a code door. We don’t have the key. Honest, mister. They don’t let us have the key.” They were frightened. Jennings felt fear himself now. Behind him the drumming was louder. He was trapped, caught.

Or was he?

Suddenly he laughed. He walked quickly up to the door. “Faith,” he murmured, raising his hand. “That’s something you should never lose.”

“What — what’s that?”

“Faith in yourself. Self-confidence.”

The door slid back as he held the code key against it. Blinding sunlight streamed in, making him blink. He held the gun steady. He was outside, at

the gate. Three guards gaped in amazement at the gun. He was at the gate — and beyond lay the woods.

"Get out of the way." Jennings fired at the metal bars of the gate. The metal burst into flame, melting, a cloud of fire rising.

"Stop him!" From behind, men came pouring, guards, out of the corridor.

Jennings leaped through the smoking gate. The metal tore at him, searing him. He ran through the smoke, rolling and falling. He got to his feet and scurried on, into the trees.

He was outside. *He* had not let him down. The key had worked, all right. He had tried it first on the wrong door.

On and on he ran, sobbing for breath, pushing through the trees. Behind him the Plant and the voices fell away. He had the papers. And he was free.

He found Kelly and gave her the film and everything he had managed to stuff into his pockets. Then he changed back to his regular clothes. Kelly drove him to the edge of Stuartsville and left him off. Jennings watched the cruiser rise up into the air, heading toward New York. Then he went into town and boarded the Intercity rocket.

On the flight he slept, surrounded by dozing businessmen. When he awoke the rocket was settling down, landing at the huge New York spaceport.

Jennings got off, mixing with the flow of people. Now that he was back there was the danger of being picked up by the SP again. Two security officers in their green uniforms watched him impassively as he took a taxi at the field station. The taxi swept him into downtown traffic. Jennings wiped his brow. That was close. Now, to find Kelly.

He ate dinner at a small restaurant, sitting in the back away from the windows. When he emerged the sun was beginning to set. He walked slowly along the sidewalk, deep in thought.

So far so good. He had got the papers and film, and he had got away. The trinkets had worked every step along the way. Without them he would have been helpless. He felt in his pocket. Two left. The serrated half poker chip, and the parcel receipt. He took the receipt out, examining it in the fading evening light.

Suddenly he noticed something. The date on it was today's date. He had caught up with the slip.

He put it away, going on. What did it mean? What was it for? He shrugged. He would know, in time. And the half poker chip. What the hell was it for? No way to tell. In any case, he was certain to get through. *He* had got him by, up to now. Surely there wasn't much left.

He came to Kelly's apartment house and stopped, looking up. Her light was on. She was back; her fast little cruiser had beaten the Intercity rocket. He entered the elevator and rose to her floor.

"Hello," he said, when she opened the door.

"You're all right?"

"Sure. Can I come in?"

He went inside. Kelly closed the door behind him. "I'm glad to see you. The city's swarming with SP men. Almost every block. And the patrols —"

"I know. I saw a couple at the spaceport." Jennings sat down on the couch. "It's good to be back, though."

“I was afraid they might stop all the Intercity flights and check through the passengers.”

“They have no reason to assume I’d be coming into the city.”

“I didn’t think of that.” Kelly sat down across from him. “Now, what comes next? Now that you have got away with the material, what are you going to do?”

“Next I meet Rethrick and spring the news on him. The news that the person who escaped from the Plant was myself. He knows that someone got away, but he doesn’t know who it was. Undoubtedly, he assumes it was an SP man.”

“Couldn’t he use the time mirror to find out?”

A shadow crossed Jennings’ face. “That’s so. I didn’t think of that.” He rubbed his jaw, frowning. “In any case, I have the material. Or, you have the material.”

Kelly nodded.

“All right. We’ll go ahead with our plans. Tomorrow we’ll see Rethrick. We’ll see him here, in New York. Can you get him down to the Office? Will he come if you send for him?”

“Yes. We have a code. If I ask him to come, he’ll come.”

“Fine. I’ll meet him there. When he realizes that we have the picture and schematics he’ll have to agree to my demands. He’ll have to let me into Rethrick Construction, on my own terms. It’s either that, or face the possibility of having the material turned over to the Security Police.”

“And once you’re in? Once Rethrick agrees to your demands?”

“I saw enough at the Plant to convince me that Rethrick is far bigger than I had realized. How big, I don’t know. No wonder *he* was so interested!”

“You’re going to demand equal control of the Company?”

Jennings nodded.

“You would never be satisfied to go back as a mechanic, would you? The way you were before.”

“No. To get booted out again?” Jennings smiled. “Anyhow, I know *he* intended better things than that. *He* laid careful plans. The trinkets. He must have planned everything long in advance. No, I’m not going back as a mechanic. I saw a lot there, level after level of machines and men. They’re doing something. And I want to be in on it.”

Kelly was silent.

“See?” Jennings said.

“I see.”

He left the apartment, hurrying along the dark street. He had stayed there too long. If the SP found the two of them together it would be all up with Rethrick Construction. He could take no chances, with the end almost in sight.

He looked at his watch. It was past midnight. He would meet Rethrick this morning, and present him with the proposition. His spirits rose as he walked. He would be safe. More than safe. Rethrick Construction was aiming at something far larger than mere industrial power. What he had seen had convinced him that a revolution was brewing. Down in the many levels below the ground, down under the fortress of concrete, guarded by

guns and armed men, Rethrick was planning a war. Machines were being turned out. The time scoop and the mirror were hard at work, watching, dipping, extracting.

No wonder *he* had worked out such careful plans. *He* had seen all this and understood, begun to ponder. The problem of the mind cleaning. His memory would be gone when he was released. Destruction of all the plans.

Destruction? There was the alternate clause in the contract. Others had seen it, used it. But not the way *he* intended!

He was after much more than anyone who had come before. *He* was the first to understand, to plan. The seven trinkets were a bridge to something beyond anything that —

At the end of the block an SP cruiser pulled up to the curb. Its doors slid open.

Jennings stopped, his heart constricting. The night patrol, roaming through the city. It was after eleven, after curfew. He looked quickly around. Everything was dark. The stores and houses were shut up tight, locked for the night. Silent apartment houses, buildings. Even the bars were dark.

He looked back the way he had come. Behind him, a second SP cruiser had stopped. Two SP officers had stepped out onto the curb. They had seen him. They were coming toward him. He stood frozen, looking up and down the street.

Across from him was the entrance of a swank hotel, its neon sign glimmering. He began to walk toward it, his heels echoing against the pavement.

“Stop!” one of the SP men called. “Come back here. What are you doing out? What’s your —”

Jennings went up the stairs, into the hotel. He crossed the lobby. The clerk was staring at him. No one else was around. The lobby was deserted. His heart sank. He didn't have a chance. He began to run aimlessly, past the desk, along a carpeted hall. Maybe it led out some back way. Behind him, the SP men had already entered the lobby.

Jennings turned a corner. Two men stepped out, blocking his way.

"Where are you going?"

He stopped, wary. "Let me by." He reached into his coat for the Boris gun. At once the men moved.

"Get him."

His arms were pinned to his sides. Professional hoods. Past them he could see light. Light and sound. Some kind of activity. People.

"All right," one of the hoods said. They dragged him back along the corridor, toward the lobby. Jennings struggled futilely. He had entered a blind alley. Hoods, a joint. The city was dotted with them, hidden in the darkness. The swank hotel a front. They would toss him out, into the hands of the SP.

Some people came along the halls, a man and a woman. Older people. Well dressed. They gazed curiously at Jennings, suspended between the two men.

Suddenly Jennings understood. A wave of relief hit him, blinding him. "Wait," he said thickly. "My pocket."

"Come on."

"Wait. Look. My right pocket. Look for yourselves."

He relaxed, waiting. The hood on his right reached, dipping cautiously into the pocket. Jennings smiled. It was over. *He* had seen even this. There was no possibility of failure. This solved one problem: where to stay until it was time to meet Rethrick. He could stay here.

The hood brought out the half poker chip, examining the serrated edges. “Just a second.” From his own coat he took a matching chip, fitting on a gold chain. He touched the edges together.

“All right?” Jennings said.

“Sure.” They let him go. He brushed off his coat automatically. “Sure, mister. Sorry. Say, you should have —”

“Take me in the back,” Jennings said, wiping his face. “Some people are looking for me. I don’t particularly want them to find me.”

“Sure.” They led him back, into the gambling rooms. The half chip had turned what might have been a disaster into an asset. A gambling and girl joint. One of the few institutions the Police left alone. He was safe. No question of that. Only one thing remained. The struggle with Rethrick!

Rethrick’s face was hard. He gazed at Jennings, swallowing rapidly.

“No,” he said. “I didn’t know it was you. We thought it was the SP.”

There was silence. Kelly sat at the chair by her desk, her legs crossed, a cigarette between her fingers. Jennings leaned against the door, his arms folded.

“Why didn’t you use the mirror?” he said.

Rethrick’s face flickered. “The mirror? You did a good job, my friend. We *tried* to use the mirror.”

“Tried?”

“Before you finished your term with us you changed a few leads inside the mirror. When we tried to operate it nothing happened. I left the plant half an hour ago. They were still working on it.”

“I did that before I finished my two years?”

“Apparently you had worked out your plans in detail. You know that with the mirror we would have no trouble tracking you down. You’re a good mechanic, Jennings. The best we ever had. We’d like to have you back, sometime. Working for us again. There’s not one of us that can operate the mirror the way you could. And right now, we can’t use it at all.”

Jennings smiled. “I had no idea *he* did anything like that. I underestimated him. *His* protection was even —”

“Who are you talking about?”

“Myself. During the two years. I use the objective. It’s easier.”

“Well, Jennings. So the two of you worked out an elaborate plan to steal our schematics. Why? What’s the purpose? You haven’t turned them over to the Police.”

“No.”

“Then I can assume it’s blackmail.”

“That’s right.”

“What for? What do you want?” Rethrick seemed to have aged. He slumped, his eyes small and glassy, rubbing his chin nervously. “You went to a lot of trouble to get us into this position. I’m curious why. While you were working for us you laid the groundwork. Now you’ve completed it, in spite of our precautions.”

“Precautions?”

“Erasing your mind. Concealing the Plant.”

“Tell him,” Kelly said. “Tell him why you did it.”

Jennings took a deep breath. “Rethrick, I did it to get back in. Back to the Company. That’s the only reason. No other.”

Rethrick stared at him. “To get back into the Company? You can come back in. I told you that.” His voice was thin and sharp, edged with strain. “What’s the matter with you? You can come back in. For as long as you want to stay.”

“As a mechanic.”

“Yes. As a mechanic. We employ many —”

“I don’t want to come back as a mechanic. I’m not interested in working for you. Listen, Rethrick. The SP picked me up as soon as I left this Office. If it hadn’t been for *him* I’d be dead.”

“They picked you up?”

“They wanted to know what Rethrick Construction does. They wanted me to tell them.”

Rethrick nodded. “That’s bad. We didn’t know that.”

“No, Rethrick. I’m not coming in as an employee you can toss out any time it pleases you. I’m coming in with you, not for you.”

“With me?” Rethrick stared at him. Slowly a film settled over his face, an ugly hard film. “I don’t understand what you mean.”

“You and I are going to run Rethrick Construction together. That’ll be the way, from now on. And no one will be burning my memory out, for their own safety.”

“That’s what you want?”

“Yes.”

“And if we don’t cut you in?”

“Then the schematics and films go to the SP. It’s as simple as that. But I don’t want to. I don’t want to destroy the Company. I want to get into the Company! I want to be safe. You don’t know what it’s like, being out there, with no place to go. An individual has no place to turn to, anymore. No one to help him. He’s caught between two ruthless forces, a pawn between political and economic powers. And I’m tired of being a pawn.”

For a long time Rethrick said nothing. He stared down at the floor, his face dull and blank. At last he looked up. “I know it’s that way. That’s something I’ve known for a long time. Longer than you have. I’m a lot older than you. I’ve seen it come, grow that way, year after year. That’s why Rethrick Construction exists. Someday, it’ll be all different. Someday, when we have the scoop and the mirror finished. When the weapons are finished.”

Jennings said nothing.

“I know very well how it is! I’m an old man. I’ve been working a long time. When they told me someone had got out of the Plant with schematics,

I thought the end had come. We already knew you had damaged the mirror. We knew there was a connection, but we had parts figured wrong.

"We thought, of course, that Security had planted you with us, to find out what we were doing. Then, when you realized you couldn't carry out your information, you damaged the mirror. With the mirror damaged, SP could go ahead and —"

He stopped, rubbing his cheek.

"Go on," Jennings said.

"So you did this alone… Blackmail. To get into the Company. You don't know what the Company is for, Jennings! How dare you try to come in! We've been working and building for a long time. You'd wreck us, to save your hide. You'd destroy us, just to save yourself."

"I'm not wrecking you. I can be a lot of help."

"I run the Company alone. It's my Company. I made it, put it together. It's mine."

Jennings laughed. "And what happens when you die? Or is the revolution going to come in your own lifetime?"

Rethrick's head jerked up.

"You'll die, and there won't be anyone to go on. You know I'm a good mechanic. You said so yourself. You're a fool, Rethrick. You want to manage it all yourself. Do everything, decide everything. But you'll die, someday. And then what will happen?"

There was silence.

“You better let me in — for the Company’s good, as well as my own. I can do a lot for you. When you’re gone the Company will survive in my hands. And maybe the revolution will work.”

“You should be glad you’re alive at all! If we hadn’t allowed you to take your trinkets out with you —”

“What else could you do? How could you let men service your mirror, see their own futures, and not let them lift a finger to help themselves. It’s easy to see why you were forced to insert the alternate-payment clause. You had no choice.”

“You don’t even know what we are doing. Why we exist.”

“I have a good idea. After all, I worked for you two years.”

Time passed. Rethrick moistened his lips again and again, rubbing his cheek. Perspiration stood out on his forehead. At last he looked up.

“No,” he said. “It’s no deal. No one will ever run the Company but me. If I die, it dies with me. It’s my property.”

Jennings became instantly alert. “Then the papers go to the Police.”

Rethrick said nothing, but a peculiar expression moved across his face, an expression that gave Jennings a sudden chill.

“Kelly,” Jennings said. “Do you have the papers with you?”

Kelly stirred, standing up. She put out her cigarette, her face pale. “No.”

“Where are they? Where did you put them?”

“Sorry,” Kelly said softly. “I’m not going to tell you.”

He stared at her. “What?”

“I’m sorry,” Kelly said again. Her voice was small and faint. “They’re safe. The SP won’t ever get them. But neither will you. When it’s convenient, I’ll turn them back to my father.”

“Your father!”

“Kelly is my daughter,” Rethrick said. “That was one thing you didn’t count on, Jennings. *He* didn’t count on it, either. No one knew that but the two of us. I wanted to keep all positions of trust in the family. I see now that it was a good idea. But it had to be kept secret. If the SP had guessed they would have picked her up at once. Her life wouldn’t have been safe.”

Jennings let his breath out slowly. “I see.”

“It seemed like a good idea to go along with you,” Kelly said. “Otherwise you’d have done it alone, anyhow. And you would have had the papers on you. As you said, if the SP caught you with the papers it would be the end of us. So I went along with you. As soon as you gave me the papers I put them in a good safe place.” She smiled a little. “No one will find them but me. I’m sorry.”

“Jennings, you can come in with us,” Rethrick said. “You can work for us forever, if you want. You can have anything you want. Anything except —”

“Except that no one runs the Company but you.”

“That’s right. Jennings, the Company is old. Older than I am. I didn’t bring it into existence. It was — you might say, *willed* to me. I took the burden on. The job of managing it, making it grow, moving it toward the day. The day of revolution, as you put it.

“My grandfather founded the Company, back in the twentieth century. The Company has always been in the family. And it will always be. Someday, when Kelly marries, there’ll be an heir to carry it on after me. So that’s taken care of. The Company was founded up in Maine, in a small New England town. My grandfather was a little old New Englander, frugal, honest, passionately independent. He had a little repair business of some sort, a little tool and fix-it place. And plenty of knack.

“When he saw government and big business closing in on everyone, he went underground. Rethrick Construction disappeared from the map. It took government quite a while to organize Maine, longer than most places. When the rest of the world had been divided up between international cartels and world-states, there was New England, still alive. Still free. And my grandfather and Rethrick Construction.

“He brought in a few men, mechanics, doctors, lawyers, little once-a-week newspapermen from the Middle West. The Company grew. Weapons appeared, weapons and knowledge. The time scoop and mirror! The Plant was built, secretly, at great cost, over a long period of time. The Plant is big. Big and deep. It goes down many more levels than you saw. *He* saw them, your alter ego. There’s a lot of power there. Power, and men who’ve disappeared, purged all over the world, in fact. We got them first, the best of them.

“Someday, Jennings, we’re going to break out. You see, conditions like this can’t go on. People can’t live this way, tossed back and forth by political and economic powers. Masses of people shoved this way and that according to the needs of this government or that cartel. There’s going to be resistance, someday. A strong, desperate resistance. Not by big people, powerful people, but by little people. Bus drivers. Grocers. Vidscreen operators. Waiters. And that’s where the Company comes in.

“We’re going to provide them with the help they’ll need, the tools, weapons, the knowledge. We’re going to ‘sell’ them our services. They’ll be able to hire us. And they’ll need someone they can hire. They’ll have a lot lined up against them. A lot of wealth and power.”

There was silence.

“Do you see?” Kelly said. “That’s why you mustn’t interfere. It’s Dad’s Company. It’s always been that way. That’s the way Maine people are. It’s part of the family. The Company belongs to the family. It’s ours.”

“Come in with us,” Rethrick said. “As a mechanic. I’m sorry, but that’s our limited outlook showing through. Maybe it’s narrow, but we’ve always done things this way.”

Jennings said nothing. He walked slowly across the office, his hands in his pockets. After a time he raised the blind and stared out at the street, far below.

Down below, like a tiny black bug, a Security cruiser moved along, drifting silently with the traffic that flowed up and down the street. It joined a second cruiser, already parked. Four SP men were standing by it in their green uniforms, and even as he watched some more could be seen coming from across the street. He let the blind down.

“It’s a hard decision to make,” he said.

“If you go out there they’ll get you,” Rethrick said. “They’re out there all the time. You haven’t got a chance.”

“Please —” Kelly said, looking up at him.

Suddenly Jennings smiled. “So you won’t tell me where the papers are. Where you put them.”

Kelly shook her head.

“Wait.” Jennings reached into his pocket. He brought out a small piece of paper. He unfolded it slowly, scanning it. “By any chance did you deposit

it with the Dunne National Bank, about three o'clock yesterday afternoon? For safekeeping in their storage vaults?"

Kelly gasped. She grabbed her handbag, unsnapping it. Jennings put the slip of paper, the parcel receipt, back in his pocket. "So *he* saw even that," he murmured. "The last of the trinkets. I wondered what it was for."

Kelly groped frantically in her purse, her face wild. She brought out a slip of paper, waving it.

"You're wrong! Here it is! It's still here." She relaxed a little. "I don't know what *you* have, but this is —"

In the air above them something moved. A dark space formed, a circle. The space stirred. Kelly and Rethrick stared up, frozen.

From the dark circle a claw appeared, a metal claw, joined to a shimmering rod. The claw dropped, swinging in a wide arc. The claw swept the paper from Kelly's fingers. It hesitated for a second. Then it drew itself up again, disappearing with the paper, into the circle of black. Then, silently, the claw and the rod and the circle blinked out. There was nothing. Nothing at all.

"Where — where did it go?" Kelly whispered. "The paper. What was that?"

Jennings patted his pocket. "It's safe. It's safe, right here. I wondered when *he* would show up. I was beginning to worry."

Rethrick and his daughter stood, shocked into silence.

"Don't look so unhappy," Jennings said. He folded his arms. "The paper's safe — and the Company's safe. When the time comes it'll be there,

strong and very glad to help out the revolution. We'll see to that, all of us, you, me and your daughter."

He glanced at Kelly, his eyes twinkling. "All three of us. And maybe by that time there'll be even more members to the family!"

The Great C

He was not told the questions until just before it was time to leave. Walter Kent drew him aside from the others. Putting his hands on Meredith's shoulders, he looked intently into his face.

"Remember that no one has ever come back. If you come back you'll be the first. The first in fifty years."

Tim Meredith nodded, nervous and embarrassed, but grateful for Kent's words. After all, Kent was the Tribe Leader, an impressive old man with iron-gray hair and beard. There was a patch over his right eye, and he carried two knives at his belt, instead of the usual one. And it was said he had knowledge of letters.

"The trip itself takes not much over a day. We're giving you a pistol. There are bullets, but no one knows how many of them are good. You have your food?"

Meredith fumbled in his pack. He brought out a metal can with a key attached. "This should be enough," he said, turning the can over.

"And water?"

Meredith rattled his canteen.

"Good." Kent studied the young man. Meredith was dressed in leather boots, a hide coat, and leggings. His head was protected by a rusty metal helmet. Around his neck binoculars hung from a rawhide cord. Kent touched the heavy gloves that covered Meredith's hands. "That's the last pair of those," he said. "We won't see anything like them again."

"Shall I leave them behind?"

“We’ll hope they — and you — come back.” Kent took him by the arm and moved even farther away, so that no one would hear. The rest of the tribe, the men and women and children, stood silently together at the lip of the Shelter, watching. The Shelter was concrete, reinforced by poles that had been cut from time to time. Once, in a remote past, a network of leaves and branches had been suspended over the lip, but that had all rotted away as the wires corroded and broke. Anyhow, there was nothing in the sky these days to notice a small circle of concrete, the entrance to the vast underground chambers in which the tribe lived.

“Now,” Kent said. “The three questions.” He leaned close to Meredith. “You have a good memory?”

“Yes,” Meredith said.

“How many books have you committed to memory?”

“I’ve only had six books read to me,” Meredith murmured. “But I know them all.”

“That’s enough. All right, listen. We’ve been a whole year deciding on these questions. Unfortunately we can ask only three, so we’ve chosen carefully.” And, so saying, he whispered the questions into Meredith’s ear.

There was silence afterward. Meredith thought over the questions, turning them around in his mind. “Do you think the Great C will be able to answer them?” he said at last.

“I don’t know. They’re difficult questions.”

Meredith nodded. “They are. Let’s pray.”

Kent slapped him on the shoulder. “All right, then. You’re ready to go. If everything goes right, you’ll be back here in two days. We’ll be watching

for you. Good luck, boy."

"Thanks," Meredith said. He walked slowly back to the others. Bill Gustavson handed him the pistol without a word, his eyes gleaming with emotion.

"A compass," John Page said, stepping away from his woman. He handed a small military compass to Meredith. His woman, a young brunette captured from a neighboring tribe, smiled encouragingly at him.

"Tim!"

Meredith turned. Anne Fry was running toward him. He reached out, taking hold of her hands. "I'll be all right," he said. "Don't worry."

"Tim." She looked up at him wildly. "Tim, you be careful. Will you?"

"Of course." He grinned, running his hand awkwardly through her thick short hair. "I'll come back." But in his heart there was a coldness, a block of hardening ice. The chill of death. He pulled suddenly away from her. "Goodbye," he said to all of them.

The tribe turned and walked away. He was alone. There was nothing to do but go. He ran over the three questions once more. Why had they picked him? But someone had to go and ask. He moved toward the edge of the clearing.

"Goodbye," Kent shouted, standing with his sons.

Meredith waved. A moment later he plunged into the forest, his hand on his knife, the compass clutched tightly to him.

He walked steadily, swinging the knife from side to side, cutting creepers and branches that got in his way. Occasionally huge insects scurried in the grass ahead of him. Once he saw a purple beetle, almost as

large as his fist. Had there been such things before the Smash? Probably not. One of the books he had learned was about lifeforms in the world, before the Smash. He could not remember anything about large insects. Animals were kept in herds and killed regularly, he recalled. No one hunted or trapped.

That night he camped on a slab of concrete, the foundation of a building that no longer existed. Twice he awoke, hearing things moving nearby, but nothing approached him, and when the sun appeared again he was unharmed. He opened his ration tin and ate from it. Then he gathered up his things and went on. Toward the middle of the day the counter at his waist began to tick ominously. He stopped, breathing deeply and considering.

He was getting near the ruins, all right. From now on he could expect radiation pools continually. He patted the counter. It was a good thing to have. Presently he advanced a short distance, walking carefully. The ticking died; he had passed the pool. He went up a slope, cutting his way through the creepers. A horde of butterflies rose up in his face and he slashed at them. He came to the top and stood, raising the binoculars to his eyes.

Far off, there was a splash of black in the center of the endless expanse of green. A burned-out place. A great swathe of ruined land, fused metal and concrete. He caught his breath. This was the ruins; he was getting close. For the first time in his life he was actually seeing the remains of a city, the pillars and rubble that had once been buildings and streets.

A wild thought leaped through his mind. He could hide, not go on! He could lie in the bushes and wait. Then, when everyone thought he was dead, when the tribe scouts had gone back, he could slip north, past them, beyond and away.

North. There was another tribe there, a large tribe. With them he would be safe. There was no way they could find him, and anyhow, the northern tribe had bombs and bacteriaspheres. If he could get to them —

No. He took a deep shuddering breath. It was wrong. He had been *sent* on this trip. Each year a youth went, as he was going now, with three

carefully-planned questions. Difficult questions. Questions that no man knew answers for. He ran the questions over in his mind. Would the Great C be able to answer them? All three of them? It was said the Great C knew everything. For a century it had answered questions, within its vast ruined house. If he did not go, if no youth were sent — He shuddered. It would make a second Smash, like the one before. It had done it once; it could do it again. He had no choice but to go on.

Meredith lowered his binoculars. He set off, down the side of the slope. A rat ran by him, a huge gray rat. He drew his knife quickly, but the rat went on. Rats — they were bad. They carried the germs.

Half an hour after his counter clicked again, this time with wild frenzy. He retreated. A pit of ruins yawned ahead, a bomb crater, not yet overgrown. It would be better to go around it. He circled off to one side, moving slowly, warily. Once the counter clicked, but that was all. A fast burst, like bullets flying. Then silence. He was safe.

Later in the day he ate more of his rations and sipped water from the canteen. It would not be long. Before nightfall he would be there. He would go down the ruined streets, toward the sprawling mass of stone and columns that was *its* house. He would mount the steps. It had been described to him many times. Each stone was carefully listed on the map back at the Shelter. He knew by heart the street that led there, to the house. He knew how the great doors lay on their faces, broken and split. He knew how the dark, empty corridors would look inside. He would pass into the vast chamber, the dark room of bats and spiders and echoing sounds. And there it would be. The Great C. Waiting silently, waiting to hear the questions. Three — just three. It would hear them. Then it would ponder, consider. Inside, it would whirr and flash. Parts, rods, switches and coils would move. Relays would open and shut.

Would it know the answers?

He went on. Far ahead, beyond miles of tangled forest land, the outline of the ruins grew.

The sun was beginning to set as he climbed the side of a hill of boulders and looked down at what had once been a city. He took his belt-light and snapped it on. The light dimmed and wavered; the little cells inside were almost gone. But he could see the ruined streets and heaps of rubble. The remains of a city in which his grandfather had lived.

He climbed down the boulders and dropped with a thud onto the street. His counter clicked angrily, but he ignored it. There was no other entrance. This was the only way. On the other side a wall of slag cut off everything. He walked slowly, breathing deeply. In the twilight gloom a few birds perched on the stones, and once in a while a lizard slithered off, disappearing into a crack. There was life here, of a sort. Birds and lizards that had adapted themselves to crawling among the bones and remains of buildings. But nothing else came this way, no tribes, no large animals. Most life, even the wild dogs, stayed away from this kind of place. And he could see why.

On he went, flashing his feeble light from side to side. He skirted a gaping hole, part of an underground shelter. Ruined guns stuck up starkly on each side of him, their barrels bent and warped. He had never fired a gun, himself. Their tribe had very few metal weapons. They depended mostly on what they could make, spears and darts. Bows and arrows. Stone clubs.

A colossus rose up before him. The remains of an enormous building. He flashed his light up, but the beam did not carry far enough for him to make it out. Was this the house? No. It was farther. He went on, stepping over what had once been a street barricade, slats of metal, bags of spilled sand, barbed wire.

A moment later he came to it.

He stopped, his hands on his hips, staring up the concrete steps at the black cavity that was the door. He was there. In a moment there would be no turning back. If he went on now, he would be committed. He would have made his decision as soon as his boots touched the steps. It was only a short distance beyond the gaping door, down a winding corridor, in the center of the building.

For a long time Meredith stood, deep in thought, rubbing his black beard. What should he do? Should he run, turn and go back the way he had come? He could shoot enough animals with his gun to stay alive. Then north —

No. They were counting on him to ask the three questions. If he did not, then someone else would have to come later on. There was no turning back. The decision had already been made. It had been made when he had been chosen. Now it was far too late.

He started up the rubbled steps, flashing his light ahead. At the entrance he stopped. Above him were some words, cut in the concrete. He knew a few letters, himself. Could he make these out? Slowly, he spelled: FEDERAL RESEARCH STATION 7 SHOW PERMIT ON DEMAND

The words meant nothing to him. Except, perhaps, the word “federal.” He had heard it before, but he could not place it. He shrugged. It did not matter. He went on.

It took only a few minutes to negotiate the corridors. Once, he turned right by mistake and found himself in a sagging courtyard, littered with stones and wiring, overgrown with dark, sticky weeds. But after that he went correctly, touching the wall with his hand to keep from making a wrong turn. Occasionally his counter ticked, but he ignored it. At last a rush of dry, fetid air blew up in his face and the concrete wall beside him abruptly ended. He was there. He flashed his light around him. Ahead was an aperture, an archway. This was it. He looked up. More words, this time on a metal plate bolted to the concrete.

DIVISION OF COMPUTATION

ONLY AUTHORIZED PERSONNEL ADMITTED

He smiled. Words, signs. Letters. All gone, all forgotten. He went on, passing through the arch. More air blew around him, rushing past him. A startled bat flapped past. By the ring of his boots he knew that the chamber was huge, larger than he had imagined. He stumbled over something and stopped quickly, flashing his light.

At first he could not make out what they were. The chamber was filled with things, rows of things, upright, crumbling, hundreds of them. He stood, frowning and puzzling. What were they? Idols? Statues? Then he understood. They were things to sit on. Rows of chairs, rotting away, breaking into bits. He kicked at one and it fell into a heap, dust rising in a cloud, dispersing into the darkness. He laughed out loud.

“Who is there?” a voice came.

He froze. His mouth opened, but no sound came. Sweat rose on his skin, tiny drops of icy sweat. He swallowed, rubbing his lips with stiff fingers.

“Who is there?” the voice came again, a metallic voice, hard and penetrating, without warmth to it. An emotionless voice. A voice of steel and brass. Relays and switches.

The Great C!

He was afraid, more afraid than ever in his life. His body was shaking terribly. Awkwardly, he moved down the aisle, past the ruined seats, flashing his light ahead.

A bank of lights glimmered, far ahead, above him. There was a whirr. The Great C was coming to life, aware of him, rousing itself from its lethargy. More lights winked into life, more sounds of switches and relays.

“Who are you?” it said.

“I — I’ve come with questions.” Meredith stumbled forward, toward the bank of lights. He struck a metal rail and reeled back, trying to regain his balance. “Three questions. I must ask you.”

There was silence.

“Yes,” the Great C said finally. “It is time for the questions again. You have prepared them for me?”

“Yes. They are very difficult. I don’t think that you will find them easy. Maybe you won’t be able to answer them. We —”

“I will answer. I have always answered. Come up closer.”

Meredith moved down the aisle, avoiding the rail.

“Yes, I will know. You think they will be difficult. You people have no conception of the questions put to me in times past. Before the Smash I answered questions that you could not even conceive. I answered questions that took days of calculating. It would have taken men months to find the same answers on their own.”

Meredith began to pluck up some courage. “Is it true,” he said, “that men came from all over the world to ask you questions?”

“Yes. Scientists from everywhere asked me things, and I answered them. There was nothing I didn’t know.”

“How — how did you come into existence?”

“Is that one of your three questions?”

“No.” Meredith shook his head quickly. “No, of course not.”

“Come nearer,” the Great C said. “I can’t make your form out. You are from the tribe just beyond the city?”

“Yes.”

“How many are there of you?”

“Several hundred.”

“You’re growing.”

“There are more children all the time.” Meredith swelled a little, with pride. “I, myself, have had children by eight women.”

“Marvelous,” the Great C said, but Meredith could not tell how it meant it. There was a moment of silence.

“I have a gun,” Meredith said. “A pistol.”

“Do you?”

He lifted it. “I’ve never fired a pistol before. We have bullets, but I don’t know if they still work.”

“What is your name?” the Great C said.

“Meredith. Tim Meredith.”

“You are a young man, of course.”

“Yes. Why?”

“I can see you fairly well,” the Great C said, ignoring his question. “Part of my equipment was destroyed in the Smash but I can still see a little. Originally, I scanned mathematical questions visually. It saved time. I see you are wearing a helmet and binoculars. And army boots. Where did you get them? Your tribe does not make such things, does it?”

“No. They were found in underground lockers.”

“Military equipment left over from the Smash,” the Great C said. “United Nations equipment, by the color.”

“Is it true that — that you could make a second Smash come? Like the first? Could you really do it again?”

“Of course! I could do it any time. Right now.”

“How?” Meredith asked cautiously. “Tell me how.”

“The same way as before,” the Great C said vaguely. “I did it before — as your tribe well knows.”

“Our legends tell us that all the world was put to the fire. Made suddenly terrible by — by atoms. And that you invented atoms, delivered them to the world. Brought them down from above. But we do not know *how* it was done.”

“I will never tell you. It is too terrible for you ever to know. It is better forgotten.”

“Certainly, if you say so,” Meredith murmured. “Man has always listened to you. Come and asked and listened.”

The Great C was silent. “You know,” it said presently, “I have existed a long time. I remember life before the Smash. I could tell you many things about it. Life was much different then. You wear a beard and hunt animals

in the woods. Before the Smash there were no woods. Only cities and farms. And men were clean-shaven. Many of them wore white clothing, then. They were scientists. They were very fine. I was constructed by scientists."

"What happened to them?"

"They left," the Great C said vaguely. "Do you recognize the name, Einstein? Albert Einstein?"

"No."

"He was the greatest scientist. Are you sure you don't know the name?" The Great C sounded disappointed. "I answered questions even *he* could not have answered. There were other Computers, then, but none so grand as I."

Meredith nodded.

"What is your first question?" the Great C said. "Give it to me and I will answer it."

Sudden fear gripped Meredith, surging over him. His knees shook. "The first question?" He murmured. "Let me see. I must consider."

"Have you forgotten?"

"No. I must arrange them in order." He moistened his lips, stroking his black beard nervously. "Let me think. I'll give you the easiest one first. However, even *it* is very difficult. The Leader of the Tribe —"

"Ask."

Meredith nodded. He glanced up, swallowing. When he spoke his voice was dry and husky. "The first question. Where — where does —"

“Louder,” the Great C said.

Meredith took a deep breath. “Where does the rain come from?” he said.

There was silence.

“Do you know?” he said, waiting tensely. Rows of lights moved above him. The Great C was meditating, considering. It whirred, a low, throbbing sound. “Do you know the answer?”

“Rain comes originally from the earth, mostly from the oceans,” the Great C said. “It rises into the air by a process of evaporation. The agent of the process is the heat of the sun. The moisture of the oceans ascends in the form of minute particles. These particles, when they are high enough, enter a colder band of air. At this point, condensation occurs. The moisture collects into great clouds. When a sufficient amount is collected the water descends again in drops. You call the drops rain.”

Meredith rubbed his chin numbly, nodding.

“I see.” He nodded again. “That is the way it occurs?”

“Yes.”

“You’re sure?”

“Of course. What is the second question? That was not very hard. You have no conception of the knowledge and information that lies stored within me. Once, I answered questions the greatest minds of the world could not make out. At least, not as fast as I. What’s the next question?”

“This is much more difficult.” Meredith smiled weakly. The Great C had answered the question about rain, but surely it could not know the

answer to this question. “Tell me,” he said slowly. “Tell me if you can: What keeps the sun moving through the sky? Why doesn’t it stop? Why doesn’t it fall to the ground?”

The Great C gave a funny whirr, almost a laugh. “You will be astonished at the answer. The sun does not move. At least, what you see as motion is not motion at all. What you see is the motion of the earth as it revolves around the sun. Since you are on the earth it seems as if you were standing still and the sun were moving. That is not so. All the nine planets, including the earth, revolve about the sun in regular elliptical orbits. They have been doing so for millions of years. Does that answer your question?

Meredith’s heart constricted. He began to tremble violently. At last he managed to pull himself together. “I can hardly believe it. Are you telling the truth?”

“For me there is only truth,” the Great C said. “It is impossible for me to lie. What is the third question?”

“Wait,” Meredith said thickly. “Let me think a moment.” He moved away. “I must consider.”

“Why?”

“Wait.” Meredith stepped back. He squatted down on the floor, staring dully ahead. It was not possible. The Great C had answered the first questions without trouble! But how could it know such things? How could anyone know things about the sun? About the sky? The Great C was imprisoned in its house. How could it know that the sun did not move? His mind reeled. How could it know about something it had not seen? Books, perhaps. He shook his head, trying to clear it. Perhaps, before the Smash, someone had read books on it. He scowled, setting his lips. Probably that was it. He stood up slowly.

“Are you ready now?” the Great C said. “Ask.”

“You can’t possibly answer this. No living creature could know. Here is the question. How did the world begin?” Meredith smiled. “You could not know. You did not exist before the world. Therefore, it is impossible that you could know.”

“There are several theories,” the Great C said calmly. “The most satisfactory is the nebular hypothesis. According to this, a gradually shrinking —”

Meredith listened, stunned, only half hearing the words. Could it be? Could the Great C really know how the world had been formed? He drew himself together, trying to catch the words.

“… There are several ways to verify this theory, giving it credence over the others. Of the others, the most popular, although in disrepute of late, is the theory that a second star once approached our own, causing a violent —”

On and on the Great C went, warming up to its subject. Clearly, it enjoyed the question. Clearly, this was the type of question that had been asked of it in the dim past, before the Smash. All three questions, questions the Tribe had worked on for an entire year, had been easily answered. It did not seem possible. He was stunned.

The Great C finished. “Well?” it said. “Are you satisfied? You can see that I know the answers. Did you really imagine that I would not be able to answer?”

Meredith said nothing. He was dazed, terrified with shock and fear. Sweat ran down his face, into his beard. He opened his mouth, but no words came.

“And now,” the Great C said, “since I have been able to answer the questions, please step forward.”

Meredith moved forward stiffly, gazing ahead as if in a trance. Around him light appeared, flickering into life, illuminating the room. For the first time he saw the Great C. For the first time the darkness lifted.

The Great C lay on its raised dais, an immense cube of dull, corroded metal. Part of the roof above it had been broken open, and blocks of concrete had dented its right side. Metal tubes and parts lay scattered around on the dais, broken and twisted elements that had been severed by the falling roof.

Once, the Great C had been shiny. Now the cube was dirty and stained. Water had dripped through the broken roof, rain and dirt washed down the walls. Birds had flown down and perched on it, leaving feathers and filth behind. In the original destruction, most of the connecting wires had been cut, the wiring from the cube to the control panel.

And with the metal and wire remnants scattered and heaped around the dais were something else. Littering the dais in a circle before the Great C were piles of bones. Bones and parts of clothing, metal belt buckles, pins, a helmet, some knives, a ration tin.

Remains of the fifty youths who had come before, each with his three questions to ask. Each hoping, praying, that the Great C would not know the answers.

“Step up,” the Great C said.

Meredith stepped up on the dais. Ahead of him a short metal ladder led to the top of the cube. He mounted the ladder without comprehension, his mind blank and dazed, moving like a machine. A portion of the metal surface of the cube grated, sliding back.

Meredith stared down. He was looking into a swirling vat of liquid. A vat within the bowels of the cube, in the very depths of the Great C. He hesitated, struggling suddenly, pulling back.

“Jump,” the Great C said.

For a long moment Meredith stood on the edge, staring down into the vat, paralyzed with fear and horror. His head rang, his vision danced and blurred. The room began to tilt, spinning slowly around him. He was swaying, reeling back and forth.

“Jump,” the Great C said.

He jumped.

A moment later the metal surface slid back into place. The surface of the cube was again unbroken.

Inside, in the depths of the machinery, the vat of hydrochloric acid swirled and eddied, plucking at the body lying inert within it. Presently the body began to dissolve, the component elements absorbed by pipes and ducts, flowing quickly to every part of the Great C. At last motion ceased. The vast cube became silent.

One by one the lights flickered out. The room was dark again.

The last act of absorption was the opening of a narrow slot in the front of the Great C. Something gray was expelled, ejected. Bones, and a metal helmet. They dropped into the piles before the cube, joining the refuse from the fifty who had come before. Then the last light went off and the machinery became silent. The Great C began its wait for the next year.

After the third day, Kent knew that the youth would not return. He came back to the Shelter with the Tribe scouts, his face dark, scowling and saying nothing.

“Another gone,” Page said. “I was so damn sure it wouldn’t be able to answer those three! A whole year’s work gone.”

“Will we always have to sacrifice to it?” Bill Gustavson asked. “Will this go on forever, year after year?”

“Some day, we’ll find a question it can’t answer,” Kent said. “Then it’ll let us alone. If we can stump it, then we won’t have to feed it any more. If only we can find the right question!”

Anne Fry came toward him, her face white. “Walter?” she said.

“Yes?”

“Has it always been — been kept alive this way? Has it always depended on one of us to keep it going? I can’t believe human beings were supposed to be used to keep a machine alive.”

Kent shook his head. “Before the Smash it must have used some kind of artificial fuel. Then something happened. Maybe its fuel ducts were damaged or broken, and it changed its ways. I suppose it had to. It was like us, in that respect. We *all* changed our ways. There was a time when human beings didn’t hunt and trap animals. And there was a time when the Great C didn’t trap human beings.”

“Why — why did it make the Smash, Walter?”

“To show it was stronger than we.”

“Was it always so strong? Stronger than man?”

“No. They say that, once, there was no Great C. That man himself brought it to life, to tell him things. But gradually it grew stronger, until at last it brought down the atoms — and with the atoms, the Smash. Now it lives off us. Its power has made us slaves. It became too strong.”

“But some day, the time will come when it won’t know the answer,” Page said.

“Then it will have to release us,” Kent said, “according to tradition. It will have to stop using us for food.”

Page clenched his fists, staring back across the forest. “Some day that time will come. Some day we’ll find a question too hard for it!”

“Let’s get started,” Gustavson said grimly. “The sooner we begin preparing for next year, the better!”

Out in the Garden

“That’s where she is,” Robert Nye said. “As a matter of fact, she’s always out there. Even when the weather’s bad. Even in the rain.”

“I see,” his friend Lindquist said, nodding. The two of them pushed open the back door and stepped out onto the porch. The air was warm and fresh. They both stopped, taking a deep breath. Lindquist looked around. “Very nice-looking garden. It’s really a garden, isn’t it?” He shook his head. “I can understand her, now. Look at it!”

“Come along,” Nye said, going down the steps onto the path. “She’s probably sitting on the other side of the tree. There’s an old seat in the form of a circle, like you used to see in the old days. She’s probably sitting with Sir Francis.”

“Sir Francis? Who’s that?” Lindquist came along, hurrying behind him.

“Sir Francis is her pet duck. A big white duck.” They turned down the path, past the lilac bushes, crowded over their great wooden frames. Rows of tulips in full bloom stretched out on both sides. A rose trellis stretched up the side of a small greenhouse. Lindquist stared in pleasure. Rose bushes, lilacs, endless shrubs and flowers. A wall of wisteria. A massive willow tree.

And sitting at the foot of the tree, gazing down at a white duck in the grass beside her, was Peggy.

Lindquist stood rooted to the spot, fascinated by Mrs. Nye’s beauty. Peggy Nye was small, with soft dark hair and great warm eyes, eyes filled with a gentle, tolerant sadness. She was buttoned up in a little blue coat and suit, with sandals on her feet and flowers in her hair. Roses.

“Sweetheart,” Nye said to her, “look who’s here. You remember Tom Lindquist, don’t you?”

Peggy looked up quickly. “Tommy Lindquist!” she exclaimed. “How are you? How nice it is to see you.”

“Thanks.” Lindquist shuffled a little in pleasure. “How have you been, Peg? I see you have a friend.”

“A friend?”

“Sir Francis. That’s his name, isn’t it?”

Peggy laughed. “Oh, Sir Francis.” She reached down and smoothed the duck’s feathers. Sir Francis went on searching out spiders from the grass. “Yes, he’s a very good friend of mine. But won’t you sit down? How long are you staying?”

“He won’t be here very long,” her husband said. “He’s driving through to New York on some kind of business.”

“That’s right,” Lindquist said. “Say, you certainly have a wonderful garden here, Peggy. I remember you always wanted a nice garden, with lots of birds and flowers.”

“It is lovely,” Peggy said. “We’re out here all the time.”

“We?”

“Sir Francis and myself.”

“They spend a lot of time together,” Robert Nye said. “Cigarette?” He held out his pack to Lindquist. “No?” Nye lit one for himself. “Personally, I can’t see anything in ducks, but I never was much on flowers and nature.”

“Robert stays indoors and works on his articles,” Peggy said. “Sit down, Tommy.” She picked up the duck and put him on her lap. “Sit here, beside us.”

“Oh, no,” Lindquist said. “This is fine.”

He became silent, looking down at Peggy and all the flowers, the grass, the silent duck. A faint breeze moved through the rows of iris behind the tree, purple and white iris. No one spoke. The garden was very cool and quiet. Lindquist sighed.

“What is it?” Peggy said.

“You know, all this reminds me of a poem.” Lindquist rubbed his forehead. “Something by Yeats, I think.”

“Yes, the garden is like that,” Peggy said. “Very much like poetry.”

Lindquist concentrated. “I know!” he said, laughing. “It’s you and Sir Francis, of course. You and Sir Francis sitting there. ‘Leda and the Swan’.”

Peggy frowned. “Do I —”

“The swan was Zeus,” Lindquist said. “Zeus took the shape of a swan to get near Leda while she was bathing. He — uh — made love to her in the shape of a swan. Helen of Troy was born — because of that, you see. The daughter of Zeus and Leda. How does it go … ‘A sudden blow: the great wings beating still above the staggering girl’ —”

He stopped. Peggy was staring up at him, her face blazing. Suddenly she leaped up, pushing the duck from her path. She was trembling with anger.

“What is it?” Robert said. “What’s wrong?”

“How dare you!” Peggy said to Lindquist. She turned and walked off quickly.

Robert ran after her, catching hold of her arm. “But what’s the matter? What’s wrong? That’s just poetry!”

She pulled away. “Let me go.”

He had never seen her so angry. Her face had become like ivory, her eyes like two stones. “But Peg —”

She looked up at him. “Robert,” she said, “I *am* going to have a baby.”

“What!”

She nodded. “I was going to tell you tonight. *He* knows.” Her lips curled. “He knows. That’s why he said it. Robert, make him leave! Please make him go!”

Nye nodded mechanically. “Sure, Peg. Sure. But — it’s true? Really true? You’re really going to have a baby?” He put his arms around her. “But that’s wonderful! Sweetheart, that’s marvelous. I never heard anything so marvelous. My golly! For heaven’s sake. It’s the most marvelous thing I ever heard.”

He led her back toward the seat, his arm around her. Suddenly his foot struck something soft, something that leaped and hissed in rage. Sir Francis waddled away, half-flying, his beak snapping in fury.

“Tom!” Robert shouted. “Listen to this. Listen to something. Can I tell him, Peg? Is it all right?”

Sir Francis hissed furiously after him, but in the excitement no one noticed him, not at all.

It was a boy, and they named him Stephen. Robert Nye drove slowly home from the hospital, deep in thought. Now that he actually had a son his thoughts returned to that day in the garden, that afternoon Tom Lindquist had stopped by. Stopped by and quoted the line of Yeats that had made Peg so angry. There had been an air of cold hostility between himself and Sir Francis, after that. He had never been able to look at Sir Francis quite the same again.

Robert parked the car in front of the house and walked up the stone steps. Actually, he and Sir Francis had never gotten along, not since the first day they had brought him back from the country. It was Peg's idea from the beginning. She had seen the sign by the farmhouse —

Robert paused at the porch steps. How angry she had been at poor Lindquist. Of course, it was a tactless line to quote, but still… He pondered, frowning. How stupid it all was! He and Peg had been married three years. There was no doubt that she loved him, that she was faithful to him. True, they did not have much in common. Peg loved to sit out in the garden, reading or meditating, or feeding the birds. Or playing with Sir Francis.

Robert went around the side of the house, into the back yard, into the garden. Of course she loved him! She loved him and she was loyal to him. It was absurd to think that she might even consider — That Sir Francis might be —

He stopped. Sir Francis was at the far end of the garden, pulling up a worm. As he watched, the white duck gulped down the worm and went on, looking for insects in the grass, bugs and spiders. Suddenly the duck stopped, warily.

Robert crossed the garden. When Peg came back from the hospital she would be busy with little Stephen. This was the best time, all right. She would have her hands full. Sir Francis would be forgotten. With the baby and all —

"Come here," Robert said. He snatched up the duck. "That's the last worm for you from this garden."

Sir Francis squawked furiously, struggling to get away, pecking frantically. Robert carried him inside the house. He got a suitcase from the closet and put the duck into it. He snapped the lock closed and then wiped his face. What now? The farm? It was only a half hour's drive into the country. But could he find it again?

He could try. He took the suitcase out to the car and dropped it into the back seat. All the way, Sir Francis quacked loudly, first in rage, then later (as they drove along the highway) with growing misery and despair.

Robert said nothing.

Peggy said little about Sir Francis, once she understood that he was gone for good. She seemed to accept his absence, although she stayed unusually quiet for a week or so. But gradually she brightened up again, laughing and playing with little Stephen, taking him out in the sun to hold on her lap, running her fingers through his soft hair.

"It's just like *down.*" Peggy said once. Robert nodded, jarred a little. Was it? More like corn silk, it seemed to him, but he said nothing.

Stephen grew, a healthy, happy baby, warmed by the sun, held in tender, loving arms hour after hour in the quiet garden, under the willow tree. After a few years he had grown into a sweet child, a child with large, dark eyes who played pretty much to himself, away from the other children, sometimes in the garden, sometimes in his room upstairs.

Stephen loved flowers. When the gardener was planting, Stephen went along with him, watching with great seriousness each handful of seeds as they went into the ground, or the poor little bits of plants wrapped in their moss, lowered gently into the warm soil.

He did not talk much. Sometimes Robert stopped his work and watched from the living room window, his hands in his pockets, smoking and studying the silent child playing by himself among the shrubs and grass. By

the time he was five, Stephen was beginning to follow the stories in the great flat books that Peggy brought home to him. The two of them sat together in the garden, looking at the pictures, tracing the stories.

Robert watched them from the window, moody and silent. He was left out, deserted. How he hated to be on the outside of things! He had wanted a son for so long —

Suddenly doubt assailed him. Again he found himself thinking about Sir Francis and what Tom had said. Angrily, he pushed the thought aside. But the boy was so far from him! Wasn't there any way he could get across to him?

Robert pondered.

One warm fall morning Robert went outdoors and stood by the back porch, breathing the air and looking around him. Peggy had gone to the store to shop and have her hair set. She would not be home for a long time.

Stephen was sitting by himself, at the little low table they had given him for his birthday, coloring pictures with his crayons. He was intent on his work, his small face lined with concentration. Robert walked toward him slowly, across the wet grass.

Stephen looked up, putting down his crayons. He smiled shyly, friendlily, watching the man coming toward him. Robert approached the table and stopped, smiling down, a little uncertain and ill at ease.

"What is it?" Stephen said.

"Do you mind if I join you?"

"No."

Robert rubbed his jaw. "Say, what is it you're doing?" he asked presently.

“Doing?”

“With the crayons.”

“I’m drawing.” Stephen held his picture up. It showed a great yellow shape, like a lemon. Stephen and he studied it together.

“What is it?” Robert said. “Still life?”

“It’s the sun.” Stephen put the picture back down and resumed his work. Robert watched him. How skillfully he worked! Now he was sketching in something green. Trees, probably. Maybe someday he would be a great painter. Like Grant Wood. Or Norman Rockwell. Pride stirred inside him.

“That looks good,” he said.

“Thank you.”

“Do you want to be a painter when you grow up? I used to do some drawing, myself. I did cartooning for the school newspaper. And I designed the emblem for our frat.”

There was silence. Did Stephen get his ability from him? He watched the boy, studying his face. He did not look much like him; not at all. Again doubt filled his mind. Could it really be that — But Peg would never —

“Robert?” the boy said suddenly.

“Yes?”

“Who was Sir Francis?”

Robert staggered. “What? What do you mean! Why do you ask that?”

“I just wondered.”

“What do you know about him? Where did you hear the name?”

Stephen went on working for a while. “I don’t know. I think mother mentioned him. Who is he?”

“He’s dead,” Robert said. “He’s been dead for some time. Your mother told you about him?”

“Perhaps it was you,” Stephen said. “Somebody mentioned him.”

“It wasn’t me!”

“Then,” Stephen said thoughtfully, “perhaps I dreamed about him. I think perhaps he came to be in a dream and spoke to me. That was it. I saw him in a dream.”

“What did he look like?” Robert said, licking his lip nervously, unhappily.

“Like this,” Stephen said. He held the picture up, the picture of the sun.

“How do you mean? Yellow?”

“No, he was white. Like the sun is, at noon. A terribly big white shape in the sky.”

“In the sky?”

“He was flying across the sky. Like the sun at noon. All ablaze. In the dream, I mean.”

Robert’s face twisted, torn by misery and uncertainty. Had she told the child about him? Had she painted a picture for him, an idealized picture?

The Duck God. The Great Duck in the Sky, descending all ablaze. Then perhaps it *was* so. Perhaps he was not really the boy's father. Perhaps — It was too much to bear.

"Well, I won't bother you any more." Robert said. He turned away, toward the house.

"Robert?" Stephen said.

"Yes?" He turned quickly.

"Robert, what are you going to do?"

Robert hesitated. "How do you mean, Stephen?"

The boy looked up from his work. His small face was calm and expressionless. "Are you going inside the house?"

"Yes. Why?"

"Robert, in a few minutes I'm going to do something secret. No one knows about it. Not even mother." Stephen hesitated, slyly studying the man's face. "Would — would you want to do it with me?"

"What is it?"

"I'm going to have a party in the garden here. A secret party. For myself alone."

"You want me to come?"

The boy nodded.

Wild happiness filled up Robert. “You want me to come to your party? It’s a secret party? I won’t tell anyone. Not even your mother! Of course I’ll come.” He rubbed his hands together, smiling in a flood of relief. “I’d be glad to come. Do you want me to bring something? Cookies? Cake? Milk? What do you want me to bring?”

“No.” Stephen shook his head. “Go inside and wash your hands and I’ll make the party ready.” He stood up, putting the crayons away in the box. “But you can’t tell anyone about it.”

“I won’t tell anyone,” Robert said. “I’ll go wash my hands. Thanks, Stephen. Thanks a lot. I’ll be right back.”

He hurried toward the house, his heart thumping with happiness. Maybe the boy was his after all! A secret party, a private, secret party. And not even Peg knew about it. It was his boy, all right! There was no doubt of that. From now on he would spend time with Stephen whenever Peg left the house. Tell him stories. How he was in North Africa during the war. Stephen would be interested in that. How he had seen Field Marshal Montgomery, once. And the German pistol he had picked up. And his photographs.

Robert went inside the house. Peg never let him do that, tell stories to the boy. But he would, by golly! He went to the sink and washed his hands. He grinned. It was his kid, all right.

There was a sound. Peg came into the kitchen with her arms full of groceries. She set them on the table with a sigh. “Hello, Robert,” she said. “What are you doing?”

His heart sank. “Home?” he murmured. “So soon? I thought you were going to get your hair fixed.”

Peggy smiled, small and pretty in her green dress and hat and high heeled shoes. “I have to go back. I just wanted to bring the groceries home first.”

“Then you’re leaving again?”

She nodded. “Why? You look so excited. Is something going on? What is it?”

“Nothing,” Robert said. He dried his hands. “Nothing at all.” He grinned foolishly.

“I’ll see you later today,” Peggy said. She went back into the living room. “Have a good time while I’m gone. Don’t let Stephen stay in the garden too long.”

“No. No, I won’t.” Robert waited, listening until he heard the sound of the front door closing. Then he hurried back out onto the porch and down the steps, into the garden. He hurried through the flowers.

Stephen had cleared off the little low table. The crayons and paper were gone, and in their place were two bowls, each on a plate. A chair was pulled up for him. Stephen watched him come across the grass and toward the table.

“What took you so long?” Stephen said impatiently. “I’ve already started.” He went on eating avidly, his eyes gleaming. “I couldn’t wait.”

“That’s all right,” Robert said. “I’m glad you went ahead.” He sat down on the little chair eagerly. “Is it good? What is it? Something extra nice?”

Stephen nodded, his mouth full. He went on, helping himself rapidly from his bowl with his hands. Robert looked down at his own plate, grinning.

His grin died. Sickened misery filled his heart. He opened his mouth, but no words came. He pushed his chair back, standing up.

“I don’t think I want any,” he murmured. He turned away. “I think maybe I’ll go back in.”

“Why?” Stephen said, surprised, stopping a moment.

“I — never cared for worms and spiders,” Robert said. He went slowly back, into the house again.

The King of the Elves

It was raining and getting dark. Sheets of water blew along the row of pumps at the edge of the filling station; the tree across the highway bent against the wind.

Shadrach Jones stood just inside the doorway of the little building, leaning against an oil drum. The door was open and gusts of rain blew in onto the wood floor. It was late; the sun had set, and the air was turning cold. Shadrach reached into his coat and brought out a cigar. He bit the end off it and lit it carefully, turning away from the door. In the gloom, the cigar burst into life, warm and glowing. Shadrach took a deep draw. He buttoned his coat around him and stepped out onto the pavement.

“Darn,” he said. “What a night!” Rain buffeted him, wind blew at him. He looked up and down the highway, squinting. There were no cars in sight. He shook his head, locked up the gasoline pumps.

He went back into the building and pulled the door shut behind him. He opened the cash register and counted the money he’d taken in during the day. It was not much.

Not much, but enough for one old man. Enough to buy him tobacco and firewood and magazines, so that he could be comfortable as he waited for the occasional cars to come by. Not very many cars came along the highway any more. The highway had begun to fall into disrepair; there were many cracks in its dry, rough surface, and most cars preferred to take the big state highway that ran beyond the hills. There was nothing in Derryville to attract them, to make them turn toward it. Derryville was a small town, too small to bring in any of the major industries, too small to be very important to anyone. Sometimes hours went by without —

Shadrach tensed. His fingers closed over the money. From outside came a sound, the melodic ring of the signal wire stretched along the pavement.

Dinggg!

Shadrach dropped the money into the till and pushed the drawer closed. He stood up slowly and walked toward the door, listening. At the door, he snapped off the light and waited in the darkness, staring out.

He could see no car there. The rain was pouring down, swirling with the wind; clouds of mist moved along the road. And something was standing beside the pumps.

He opened the door and stepped out. At first, his eyes could make nothing out. Then the old man swallowed uneasily.

Two tiny figures stood in the rain, holding a kind of platform between them. Once, they might have been gaily dressed in bright garments, but now their clothes hung limp and sodden, dripping in the rain. They glanced halfheartedly at Shadrach. Water streaked their tiny faces, great drops of water. Their robes blew about them with the wind, lashing and swirling.

On the platform, something stirred. A small head turned wearily, peering at Shadrach. In the dim light, a rain-streaked helmet glinted dully.

“Who are you?” Shadrach said.

The figure on the platform raised itself up. “I’m the King of the Elves and I’m wet.”

Shadrach stared in astonishment.

“That’s right,” one of the bearers said. “We’re all wet.”

A small group of Elves came straggling up, gathering around their king. They huddled together forlornly, silently.

“The King of the Elves,” Shadrach repeated. “Well, I’ll be darned.”

Could it be true? They were very small, all right, and their dripping clothes were strange and oddly colored.

But Elves?

“I’ll be darned. Well, whatever you are, you shouldn’t be out on a night like this.”

“Of course not,” the king murmured. “No fault of our own. No fault…” His voice trailed off into a choking cough. The Elf soldiers peered anxiously at the platform.

“Maybe you better bring him inside,” Shadrach said. “My place is up the road. He shouldn’t be out in the rain.”

“Do you think we like being out on a night like this?” one of the bearers muttered. “Which way is it? Direct us.”

Shadrach pointed up the road. “Over there. Just follow me. I’ll get a fire going.”

He went down the road, feeling his way onto the first of the flat stone steps that he and Phineas Judd had laid during the summer. At the top of the steps, he looked back. The platform was coming slowly along, swaying a little from side to side. Behind it, the Elf soldiers picked their way, a tiny column of silent dripping creatures, unhappy and cold.

“I’ll get the fire started,” Shadrach said. He hurried them into the house.

Wearily, the Elf King lay back against the pillow. After sipping hot chocolate, he had relaxed and his heavy breathing sounded suspiciously like a snore.

Shadrach shifted in discomfort.

“I’m sorry,” the Elf King said suddenly, opening his eyes. He rubbed his forehead. “I must have drifted off. Where was I?”

“You should retire, Your Majesty,” one of the soldiers said sleepily. “It is late and these are hard times.”

“True,” the Elf King said, nodding. “Very true.” He looked up at the towering figure of Shadrach, standing before the fireplace, a glass of beer in his hand. “Mortal, we thank you for your hospitality. Normally, we do not impose on human beings.”

“It’s those Trolls,” another of the soldiers said, curled up on a cushion of the couch.

“Right,” another soldier agreed. He sat up, groping for his sword. “Those reeking Trolls, digging and croaking —”

“You see,” the Elf King went on,“as our party was crossing from the Great Low Steps toward the Castle, where it lies in the hollow of the Towering Mountains —”

“You mean Sugar Ridge,” Shadrach supplied helpfully.

“The Towering Mountains. Slowly we made our way. A rain storm came up. We became confused. All at once a group of Trolls appeared, crashing through the underbrush. We left the woods and sought safety on the Endless Path —”

“The highway. Route Twenty.”

“So that is why we’re here.” The Elf King paused a moment. “Harder and harder it rained. The wind blew around us, cold and bitter. For an

endless time we toiled along. We had no idea where we were going or what would become of us."

The Elf King looked up at Shadrach. "We knew only this: Behind us, the Trolls were coming, creeping through the woods, marching through the rain, crushing everything before them."

He put his hand to his mouth and coughed, bending forward. All the Elves waited anxiously until he was done. He straightened up.

"It was kind of you to allow us to come inside. We will not trouble you for long. It is not the custom of the Elves —"

Again he coughed, covering his face with his hand. The Elves drew toward him apprehensively. At last the king stirred. He sighed.

"What's the matter?" Shadrach asked. He went over and took the cup of chocolate from the fragile hand. The Elf King lay back, his eyes shut.

"He has to *rest,"* one of the soldiers said. "Where's your room? The sleeping room?"

"Upstairs," Shadrach said. "I'll show you where."

Late that night, Shadrach sat by himself in the dark, deserted living room, deep in meditation. The Elves were asleep above him, upstairs in the bedroom, the Elf King in the bed, the others curled up together on the rug.

The house was silent. Outside, the rain poured down endlessly, blowing against the house. Shadrach could hear the tree branches slapping in the wind. He clasped and unclasped his hands. What a strange business it was — all these Elves, with their old, sick king, their piping voices. How anxious and peevish they were!

But pathetic, too; so small and wet, with water dripping down from them, and all their gay robes limp and soggy.

The Trolls — what were they like? Unpleasant and not very clean. Something about digging, breaking and pushing through the woods…

Suddenly, Shadrach laughed in embarrassment. What was the matter with him, believing all this? He put his cigar out angrily, his ears red. What was going on? What kind of joke was this?

Elves? Shadrach grunted in indignation. Elves in Derryville? In the middle of Colorado? Maybe there were Elves in Europe. Maybe in Ireland. He had heard of that. But here? Upstairs in his own house, sleeping in his own bed?

“I’ve heard just about enough of this,” he said. “I’m not an idiot, you know.”

He turned toward the stairs, feeling for the banister in the gloom. He began to climb.

Above him, a light went on abruptly. A door opened.

Two Elves came slowly out onto the landing. They looked down at him. Shadrach halted halfway up the stairs. Something on their faces made him stop.

“What’s the matter?” he asked hesitantly.

They did not answer. The house was turning cold, cold and dark, with the chill of the rain outside and the chill of the unknown inside.

“What is it?” he said again. “What’s the matter?”

“The King is dead,” one of the Elves said. “He died a few moments ago.”

Shadrach stared up, wide-eyed. “He did? But —”

“He was very cold and very tired.” The Elves turned away, going back into the room, slowly and quietly shutting the door.

Shadrach stood, his fingers on the banister, hard, lean fingers, strong and thin.

He nodded his head blankly.

“I see,” he said to the closed door. “He’s dead.”

The Elf soldiers stood around him in a solemn circle. The living room was bright with sunlight, the cold white glare of early morning.

“But wait,” Shadrach said. He plucked at his necktie. “I have to get to the filling station. Can’t you talk to me when I come home?”

The faces of the Elf soldiers were serious and concerned.

“Listen,” one of them said. “Please hear us out. It is very important to us.”

Shadrach looked past them. Through the window he saw the highway, steaming in the heat of day, and down a little way was the gas station, glittering brightly. And even as he watched, a car came up to it and honked thinly, impatiently. When nobody came out of the station, the car drove off again down the road.

“We beg you,” a soldier said.

Shadrach looked down at the ring around him, the anxious faces, scored with concern and trouble. Strangely, he had always thought of Elves as carefree beings, flitting without worry or sense —

“Go ahead,” he said. “I’m listening.” He went over to the big chair and sat down. The Elves came up around him. They conversed among themselves for a moment, whispering, murmuring distantly. Then they turned toward Shadrach.

The old man waited, his arms folded.

“We cannot be without a king,” one of the soldiers said. “We could not survive. Not these days.”

“The Trolls,” another added. “They multiply very fast. They are terrible beasts. They’re heavy and ponderous, crude, bad-smelling —”

“The odor of them is awful. They come up from the dark wet places, under the earth, where the blind, groping plants feed in silence, far below the surface, far from the sun.”

“Well, you ought to elect a king, then,” Shadrach suggested. “I don’t see any problem there.”

“We do not elect the King of the Elves,” a soldier said. “The old king must name his successor.”

“Oh,” Shadrach replied. “Well, there’s nothing wrong with that method.”

“As our old king lay dying, a few distant words came forth from his lips,” a soldier said. “We bent closer, frightened and unhappy, listening.”

“Important, all right,” agreed Shadrach. “Not something you’d want to miss.”

“He spoke the name of him who will lead us.”

“Good. You caught it, then. Well, where’s the difficulty?”

“The name he spoke was — was your name.”

Shadrach stared. *“Mine?”*

“The dying king said: ‘Make him, the towering mortal, your king. Many things will come if he leads the Elves into battle against the Trolls. I see the rising once again of the Elf Empire, as it was in the old days, as it was fore —”

“Me!” Shadrach leaped up. “Me? King of the Elves?”

Shadrach walked about the room, his hands in his pockets. “Me, Shadrach Jones, King of the Elves.” He grinned a little. “I sure never thought of it before.”

He went to the mirror over the fireplace and studied himself. He saw his thin, graying hair, his bright eyes, dark skin, his big Adam’s apple.

“King of the Elves,” he said. “King of the Elves. Wait till Phineas Judd hears about this. Wait till I tell him!”

Phineas Judd would certainly be surprised!

Above the filling station, the sun shown, high in the clear blue sky.

Phineas Judd sat playing with the accelerator of his old Ford truck. The motor raced and slowed. Phineas reached over and turned the ignition key off, then rolled the window all the way down.

“What did you say?” he asked. He took off his glasses and began to polish them, steel rims between slender, deft fingers that were patient from years of practice. He restored his glasses to his nose and smoothed what remained of his hair into place.

“What was it, Shadrach?” he said. “Let’s hear that again.”

“I’m King of the Elves,” Shadrach repeated. He changed position, bringing his other foot up on the running board. “Who would have thought it? Me, Shadrach Jones, King of the Elves.”

Phineas gazed at him. “How long have you been — King of the Elves, Shadrach?”

“Since the night before last.”

“I see. The night before last.” Phineas nodded. “I see. And what, may I ask, occurred the night before last?”

“The Elves came to my house. When the old king died, he told them that —”

A truck came rumbling up and the driver leaped out. “Water!” he said. “Where the hell is the hose?”

Shadrach turned reluctantly. “I’ll get it.” He turned back to Phineas. “Maybe I can talk to you tonight when you come back from town. I want to tell you the rest. It’s very interesting.”

“Sure,” Phineas said, starting up his little truck. “Sure, Shadrach. I’m very interested to hear.”

He drove off down the road.

Later in the day, Dan Green ran his flivver up to the filling station.

“Hey, Shadrach,” he called. “Come over here! I want to ask you something.”

Shadrach came out of the little house, holding a waste-rag in his hand.

“What is it?”

“Come here.” Dan leaned out the window, a wide grin on his face, splitting his face from ear to ear. “Let me ask you something, will you?”

“Sure.”

“Is it true? Are you really the King of the Elves?”

Shadrach flushed a little. “I guess I am,” he admitted, looking away. “That’s what I am, all right.”

Dan’s grin faded. “Hey, you trying to kid me? What’s the gag?”

Shadrach became angry. “What do you mean? Sure, I’m the King of the Elves. And anyone who says I’m not —”

“All right, Shadrach,” Dan said, starting up the flivver quickly. “Don’t get mad. I was just wondering.”

Shadrach looked very strange.

“All right,” Dan said. “You don’t hear me arguing, do you?”

By the end of the day, everyone around knew about Shadrach and how he had suddenly become the King of the Elves. Pop Richey, who ran the Lucky Store in Derryville, claimed Shadrach was doing it to drum up trade for the filling station.

“He’s a smart old fellow,” Pop said. “Not very many cars go along there any more. He knows what he’s doing.”

“I don’t know,” Dan Green disagreed. “You should hear him, I think he really believes it.”

“King of the Elves?” They all began to laugh. “Wonder what he’ll say next.”

Phineas Judd pondered. “I’ve known Shadrach for years. I can’t figure it out.” He frowned, his face wrinkled and disapproving. “I don’t like it.”

Dan looked at him. “Then you think he believes it?”

“Sure,” Phineas said. “Maybe I’m wrong, but I really think he does.”

“But how could he believe it?” Pop asked. “Shadrach is no fool. He’s been in business for a long time. He must be getting something out of it, the way I see it. But what, if it isn’t to build up the filling station?”

“Why, don’t you know what he’s getting?” Dan said, grinning. His gold tooth shone.

“What?” Pop demanded.

“He’s got a whole kingdom to himself, that’s what — to do with like he wants. How would you like that, Pop? Wouldn’t you like to be King of the Elves and not have to run this old store any more?”

“There isn’t anything wrong with my store,” Pop said. “I ain’t ashamed to run it. Better than being a clothing salesman.”

Dan flushed. “Nothing wrong with that, either.” He looked at Phineas. “Isn’t that right? Nothing wrong with selling clothes, is there, Phineas?”

Phineas was staring down at the floor. He glanced up. “What? What was that?”

“What you thinking about?” Pop wanted to know. “You look worried.”

“I’m worried about Shadrach,” Phineas said. “He’s getting old. Sitting out there by himself all the time, in the cold weather, with the rain water I running over the floor — it blows something awful in the winter, along the highway —”

“Then you *do* think he believes it?” Dan persisted. “You *don’t* think he’s getting something out of it?”

Phineas shook his head absently and did not answer.

The laughter died down. They all looked at one another.

That night, as Shadrach was locking up the filling station, a small figure came toward him from the darkness.

“Hey!” Shadrach called out. “Who are you?”

An Elf soldier came into the light, blinking. He was dressed in a little gray robe, buckled at the waist with a band of silver. On his feet were little leather boots. He carried a short sword at his side.

“I have a serious message for you,” the Elf said. “Now, where did I put it?”

He searched his robe while Shadrach waited. The Elf brought out a tiny scroll and unfastened it, breaking the wax expertly. He handed it to Shadrach.

“What’s it say?” Shadrach asked. He bent over, his eyes close to the vellum. “I don’t have my glasses with me. Can’t quite make out these little letters.”

“The Trolls are moving. They’ve heard that the old king is dead, and they’re rising, in all the hills and valleys around. They will try to break the Elf Kingdom into fragments, scatter the Elves —”

“I see,” Shadrach said. “Before your new king can really get started.”

“That’s right.” The Elf soldier nodded. “This is a crucial moment for the Elves. For centuries, our existence has been precarious. There are so many Trolls, and Elves are very frail and often take sick —”

“Well, what should I do? Are there any suggestions?”

“You’re supposed to meet with us under the Great Oak tonight. We’ll take you into the Elf Kingdom, and you and your staff will plan and map the defense of the Kingdom.”

“What?” Shadrach looked uncomfortable. “But I haven’t eaten dinner. And my gas station — tomorrow is Saturday, and a lot of cars —”

“But you are King of the Elves,” the soldier said.

Shadrach put his hand to his chin and rubbed it slowly.

“That’s right,” he replied. “I am, ain’t I?”

The Elf soldier bowed.

“I wish I’d known this sort of thing was going to happen,” Shadrach said. “I didn’t suppose being King of the Elves —”

He broke off, hoping for an interruption. The Elf soldier watched him calmly, without expression.

“Maybe you ought to have someone else as your king,” Shadrach decided. “I don’t know very much about war and things like that, fighting and all that sort of business.” He paused, shrugged his shoulders. “It’s nothing I’ve ever mixed in. They don’t have wars here in Colorado. I mean they don’t have wars between human beings.”

Still the Elf soldier remained silent.

“Why was I picked?” Shadrach went on helplessly, twisting his hands. “1 don’t know anything about it. What made him go and pick me? Why didn’t he pick somebody else?”

“He trusted you,” the Elf said. “You brought him inside your house, out of the rain. He knew that you expected nothing for it, that there was nothing you wanted. He had known few who gave and asked nothing back.”

“Oh.” Shadrach thought it over. At last he looked up. “But what about my gas station? And my house? And what will they say, Dan Green and Pop down at the store —”

The Elf soldier moved away, out of the light. “I have to go. It’s getting late, and at night the Trolls come out. I don’t want to be too far away from the others.”

“Sure,” Shadrach said.

“The Trolls are afraid of nothing, now that the old king is dead. They forage everywhere. No one is safe.”

“Where did you say the meeting is to be? And what time?”

“At the Great Oak. When the moon sets tonight, just as it leaves the sky.”

“I’ll be there, I guess,” Shadrach said. “I suppose you’re right. The King of the Elves can’t afford to let his kingdom down when it needs him most.”

He looked around, but the Elf soldier was already gone.

Shadrach walked up the highway, his mind full of doubts and wonderings. When he came to the first of the flat stone steps, he stopped.

“And the old oak tree is on Phineas’s farm! What’ll Phineas say?”

But he was the Elf King and the Trolls were moving in the hills. Shadrach stood listening to the rustle of the wind as it moved through the trees beyond the highway, and along the far slopes and hills.

Trolls? Were there really Trolls there, rising up, bold and confident in the darkness of the night, afraid of nothing, afraid of no one?

And this business of being Elf King…

Shadrach went on up the steps, his lips pressed tight. When he reached the top of the stone steps, the last rays of sunlight had already faded. It was night.

Phineas Judd stared out the window. He swore and shook his head. Then he went quickly to the door and ran out onto the porch. In the cold moonlight a dim figure was walking slowly across the lower field, coming toward the house along the cow trail.

“Shadrach!” Phineas cried. “What’s wrong? What are you doing out this time of night?”

Shadrach stopped and put his fists stubbornly on his hips.

“You go back home,” Phineas said. “What’s got into you?”

“I’m sorry, Phineas,” Shadrach answered. “I’m sorry I have to go over your land. But I have to meet somebody at the old oak tree.”

“At this time of night?”

Shadrach bowed his head.

“What’s the matter with you, Shadrach? Who in the world you going to meet in the middle of the night on my farm?”

“I have to meet with the Elves. We’re going to plan out the war with the Trolls.”

“Well, I’ll be damned,” Phineas Judd said. He went back inside the house and slammed the door. For a long time he stood thinking. Then he went back out on the porch again. “What did you say you were doing? You don’t have to tell me, of course, but I just —”

“I have to meet the Elves at the old oak tree. We must have a general council of war against the Trolls.”

“Yes, indeed. The Trolls. Have to watch for the Trolls all the time.”

“Trolls are everywhere,” Shadrach stated, nodding his head. “I never realized it before. You can’t forget them or ignore them. They never forget you. They’re always planning, watching you —”

Phineas gaped at him, speechless.

“Oh, by the way,” Shadrach said. “I may be gone for some time. It depends on how long this business is going to take. I haven’t had much experience in fighting Trolls, so I’m not sure. But I wonder if you’d mind

looking after the gas station for me, about twice a day, maybe once in the morning and once at night, to make sure no one's broken in or anything like that."

"You're going away?" Phineas came quickly down the stairs. "What's all this about Trolls? Why are you going?"

Shadrach patiently repeated what he had said.

"But what for?"

"Because I'm the Elf King. I have to lead them."

There was silence. "I see," Phineas said, at last. "That's right, you *did* mention it before, didn't you? But, Shadrach, why don't you come inside for a while and you can tell me about the Trolls and drink some coffee and —"

"Coffee?" Shadrach looked up at the pale moon above him, the moon and the bleak sky. The world was still and dead and the night was very cold and the moon would not be setting for some time.

Shadrach shivered.

"It's a cold night," Phineas urged. "Too cold to be out. Come on in —"

"I guess I have a little time," Shadrach admitted. "A cup of coffee wouldn't do any harm. But I can't stay very long…"

Shadrach stretched his legs out and sighed. "This coffee sure tastes good, Phineas."

Phineas sipped a little and put his cup down. The living room was quiet and warm. It was a very neat little living room with solemn pictures on the

walls, gray uninteresting pictures that minded their own business. In the corner was a small reed organ with sheet music carefully arranged on top of it.

Shadrach noticed the organ and smiled. “You still play, Phineas?”

“Not much any more. The bellows don’t work right. One of them won’t come back up.”

“I suppose I could fix it sometime. If I’m around, I mean.”

“That would be fine,” Phineas said. “I was thinking of asking you.”

“Remember how you used to play ‘Vilia’ and Dan Green came up with that lady who worked for Pop during the summer? The one who wanted to open a pottery shop?”

“I sure do,” Phineas said.

Presently, Shadrach set down his coffee cup and shifted in his chair.

“You want more coffee?” Phineas asked quickly. He stood up. “A little more?”

“Maybe a little. But I have to be going pretty soon.”

“It’s a bad night to be outside.”

Shadrach looked through the window. It was darker; the moon had almost gone down. The fields were stark. Shadrach shivered. “I wouldn’t disagree with you,” he said.

Phineas turned eagerly. “Look, Shadrach. You go on home where it’s warm. You can come out and fight Trolls some other night. There’ll always

be Trolls. You said so yourself. Plenty of time to do that later, when the weather's better. When it's not so cold."

Shadrach rubbed his forehead wearily. "You know, it all seems like some sort of a crazy dream. When did I start talking about Elves and Trolls? When did it all begin?" His voice trailed off. "Thank you for the coffee." He got slowly to his feet. "It warmed me up a lot. And I appreciated the talk. Like old times, you and me sitting here the way we used to."

"Are you going?" Phineas hesitated. *"Home?"*

"I think I better. It's late."

Phineas got quickly to his feet. He led Shadrach to the door, one arm around his shoulder.

"All right, Shadrach, you go on home. Take a good hot bath before you go to bed. It'll fix you up. And maybe just a little snort of brandy to warm the blood."

Phineas opened the front door and they went slowly down the porch steps, onto the cold, dark ground.

"Yes, I guess I'll be going," Shadrach said. "Good night —"

"You go on home." Phineas patted him on the arm. "You run along hot and take a good hot bath. And then go straight to bed."

"That's a good idea. Thank you, Phineas. I appreciate your kindness." Shadrach looked down at Phineas's hand on his arm. He had not been that close to Phineas for years.

Shadrach contemplated the hand. He wrinkled his brow, puzzled.

Phineas’s hand was huge and rough and his arms were short. His fingers were blunt; his nails broken and cracked. Almost black, or so it seemed in the moonlight.

Shadrach looked up at Phineas. “Strange,” he murmured.

“What’s strange, Shadrach?”

In the moonlight, Phineas’s face seemed oddly heavy and brutal. Shadrach had never noticed before how the jaw bulged, what a great protruding jaw it was. The skin was yellow and coarse, like parchment. Behind glasses, the eyes were like two stones, cold and lifeless. The ears wer immense, the hair stringy and matted.

Odd that he never noticed before. But he had never seen Phineas in the moonlight.

Shadrach stepped away, studying his old friend. From a few feet off Phineas Judd seemed unusually short and squat. His legs were slightly bowed. His feet were enormous. And there was something else —

“What is it?” Phineas demanded, beginning to grow suspicious. “Is there something wrong?”

Something was completely wrong. And he had never noticed it, not in all the years they had been friends. All around Phineas Judd was an odor, a faint, pungent stench of rot, of decaying flesh, damp and moldy.

Shadrach glanced slowly about him. “Something wrong?” he echoed. “No, I wouldn’t say that.”

By the side of the house was an old rain barrel, half fallen apart. Shadrach walked over to it.

“No, Phineas. I wouldn’t say there’s something wrong.”

“What are you doing?”

“Me?” Shadrach took hold of one of the barrel staves and pulled it loose. He walked back to Phineas, carrying the barrel stave carefully. “I’m King of the Elves. Who — or what — are you?”

Phineas roared and attacked with his great murderous shovel hands.

Shadrach smashed him over the head with the barrel stave. Phineas bellowed with rage and pain.

At the shattering sound, there was a clatter and from underneath the house came a furious horde of bounding, leaping creatures, dark bent-over things, their bodies heavy and squat, their feet and heads immense. Shadrach took one look at the flood of dark creatures pouring out from Phineas’s basement. He knew what they were.

“Help!” Shadrach shouted. “Trolls! Help!”

The trolls were all around him, grabbing hold of him, tugging at him, climbing up him, pummeling his face and body.

Shadrach fell to with the barrel stave, swung again and again, kicking Trolls with his feet, whacking them with the barrel stave. There seemed to be hundreds of them. More and more poured out from under Phineas’s house, a surging black tide of pot-shaped creatures, their great eyes and teeth gleaming in the moonlight.

“Help!” Shadrach cried again, more feebly now. He was getting winded. His heart labored painfully. A Troll bit his wrist, clinging to his arm. Shadrach flung it away, pulling loose from the horde clutching his trouser legs, the barrel stave rising and falling.

One of the Trolls caught hold of the stave. A whole group of them helped, wrenching furiously, trying to pull it away. Shadrach hung on desperately. Trolls were all over him, on his shoulders, clinging to his coat, riding his arms, his legs, pulling his hair —

He heard a high-pitched clarion call from a long way off, the sound of some distant golden trumpet, echoing in the hills.

The Trolls suddenly stopped attacking. One of them dropped off Shadrach's neck. Another let go of his arm.

The call came again, this time more loudly.

"Elves!" a Troll rasped. He turned and moved toward the sound, grinding his teeth and spitting with fury.

"Elves!"

The Trolls swarmed forward, a growing wave of gnashing teeth and nails, pushing furiously toward the Elf columns. The Elves broke formation and joined battle, shouting with wild joy in their shrill, piping voices. The tide of Trolls rushed against them, Troll against Elf, shovel nails against golden sword, biting jaw against dagger.

"Kill the Elves!"

"Death to the Trolls!"

"Onward!"

"Forward!"

Shadrach fought desperately with the Trolls that were still clinging to him. He was exhausted, panting and gasping for breath. Blindly, he

whacked on and on, kicking and jumping, throwing Trolls away from him, through the air and across the ground.

How long the battle raged, Shadrach never knew. He was lost in a sea of dark bodies, round and evil-smelling, clinging to him, tearing, biting, fastened to his nose and hair and fingers. He fought silently, grimly.

All around him, the Elf legions clashed with the Troll horde, little groups of struggling warriors on all sides.

Suddenly Shadrach stopped fighting. He raised his head, looking uncertainly around him. Nothing moved. Everything was silent. The fighting had ceased.

A few Trolls still clung to his arms and legs. Shadrach whacked one with the barrel stave. It howled and dropped to the ground. He staggered back, struggling with the last Troll, who hung tenaciously to his arm.

“Now you!” Shadrach gasped. He pried the Troll loose and flung it into the air. The Troll fell to the ground and scuttled off into the night.

There was nothing more. No Troll moved anywhere. All was silent across the bleak moon-swept fields.

Shadrach sank down on a stone. His chest rose and fell painfully. Red specks swam before his eyes. Weakly, he got out his pocket handkerchief and wiped his neck and face. He closed his eyes, shaking his head from side to side.

When he opened his eyes again, the Elves were coming toward him, gathering their legion together again. The Elves were disheveled and bruised. Their golden armor was gashed and torn. Their helmets were bent or missing. Most of their scarlet plumes were gone. Those that still remained were drooping and broken.

But the battle was over. The war was won. The Troll hordes had been put to flight.

Shadrach got slowly to his feet. The Elf warriors stood around him in a circle, gazing up at him with silent respect. One of them helped steady him as he put his handkerchief away in his pocket.

“Thank you,” Shadrach murmured. “Thank you very much.”

“The Trolls have been defeated,” an Elf stated, still awed by what had happened.

Shadrach gazed around at the Elves. There were many of them, more than he had ever seen before. All the Elves had turned out for the battle. They were grim-faced, stern with the seriousness of the moment, weary from the terrible struggle.

“Yes, they’re gone, all right,” Shadrach said. He was beginning to get his breath. “That was a close call. I’m glad you fellows came when you did. I was just about finished, fighting them all by myself.”

“All alone, the King of the Elves held off the entire Troll army,” an Elf announced shrilly.

“Eh?” Shadrach said, taken aback. Then he smiled. “That’s true, I *did* fight them alone for a while. I *did* hold off the Trolls all by myself. The whole darn Troll army.”

“There is more,” an Elf said.

Shadrach blinked. “More?”

“Look over here, O King, mightiest of all the Elves. This way. To the right.”

The Elves led Shadrach over.

“What is it?” Shadrach murmured, seeing nothing at first. He gazed down, trying to pierce the darkness. “Could we have a torch over here?”

Some Elves brought little pine torches.

There, on the frozen ground, lay Phineas Judd, on his back. His eyes were blank and staring, his mouth half open. He did not move. His body was cold and stiff.

“He is dead,” an Elf said solemnly.

Shadrach gulped in sudden alarm. Cold sweat stood out abruptly on his forehead. “My gosh! My old friend! What have I done?”

“You have slain the Great Troll.”

Shadrach paused.

“I what?”

“You have slain the Great Troll, leader of all the Trolls.”

“This has never happened before,” another Elf exclaimed excitedly. “The Great Troll has lived for centuries. Nobody imagined he could die. This is our most historic moment.”

All the Elves gazed down at the silent form with awe, awe mixed with more than a little fear.

“Oh, go on!” Shadrach said. “That’s just Phineas Judd.”

But as he spoke, a chill moved up his spine. He remembered what he had seen a little while before, as he stood close by Phineas, as the dying moonlight crossed his old friend's face.

"Look." One of the Elves bent over and unfastened Phineas's blue-serge vest. He pushed the coat and vest aside. "See?"

Shadrach bent down to look.

He gasped.

Underneath Phineas Judd's blue-serge vest was a suit of mail, an encrusted mesh of ancient, rusting iron, fastened tightly around the squat body. On the mail stood an engraved insignia, dark and time-worn, embedded with dirt and rust. A moldering half-obliterated emblem. The emblem of a crossed owl leg and toadstool.

The emblem of the Great Troll.

"Golly," Shadrach said. "And *I* killed him."

For a long time he gazed silently down. Then, slowly, realization began to grow in him. He straightened up, a smile forming on his face.

"What is it, O King?" an Elf piped.

"I just thought of something," Shadrach said. "I just realized that — that since the Great Troll is dead and the Troll army has been put to flight —"

He broke off. All the Elves were waiting.

"I thought maybe I — that is, maybe if you don't need me any more —"

The Elves listened respectfully. "What is it, Mighty King? Go on."

“I thought maybe now I could go back to the filling station and not be king any more.” Shadrach glanced hopefully around at them. “Do you think so? With the war over and all. With him dead. What do you say?”

For a time, the Elves were silent. They gazed unhappily down at the ground. None of them said anything. At last they began moving away, collecting their banners and pennants.

“Yes, you may go back,” an Elf said quietly. “The war is over. The Trolls have been defeated. You may return to your filling station, if that is what you want.”

A flood of relief swept over Shadrach. He straightened up, grinning from ear to ear. “Thanks! That’s fine. That’s really fine. That’s the best news I’ve heard in my life.”

He moved away from the Elves, rubbing his hands together and blowing on them.

“Thanks an awful lot.” He grinned around at the silent Elves. “Well, I guess I’ll be running along, then. It’s late. Late and cold. It’s been a hard night. I’ll — I’ll see you around.”

The Elves nodded silently.

“Fine. Well, good night.” Shadrach turned and started along the path. He stopped for a moment, waving back at the Elves. “It was quite a battle, wasn’t it? We really licked them.” He hurried on along the path. Once again he stopped, looking back and waving. “Sure glad I could help out. Well, good night!”

One or two on the Elves waved, but none of them said anything.

Shadrach Jones walked slowly toward his place. He could see it from the rise, the highway that few cars traveled, the filling station falling to ruin, the house that might not last as long as himself, and not enough money coming it to repair them or buy a better location.

He turned around and went back.

The Elves were still gathered there in the silence of the night. They had not moved away.

“I was hoping you hadn’t gone,” Shadrach said, relieved.

“And we were hoping you would not leave,” said a soldier.

Shadrach kicked a stone. It bounced through the tight silence stopped. The Elves were still watching him.

“Leave?” Shadrach asked. “And me King of the Elves?”

“Then you will remain our king?” an Elf cried.

“It’s a hard thing for a man of my age to change. To stop selling gasoline and suddenly be a king. It scared me for a while. But it doesn’t any more.”

“You will? You *will?”*

“Sure,” said Shadrach Jones.

The little circle of Elf torches closed in joyously. In their light, he saw a platform like the one that had carried the old King of the Elves. But this one was much larger, big enough to hold a man, and dozens of the soldiers waited with proud shoulders under the shafts.

A soldier gave him a happy bow. “For you, Sire.”

Shadrach climbed aboard. It was less comfortable than walking, but he knew this was how they wanted to take him to the Kingdom of the Elves.

Colony

Major Lawrence Hall bent over the binocular microscope, correcting the fine adjustment.

"Interesting," he murmured.

"Isn't it? Three weeks on this planet and we've yet to find a harmful life form." Lieutenant Friendly sat down on the edge of the lab table, avoiding the culture bowls. "What kind of place is this? No disease germs, no lice, no flies, no rats, no —"

"No whiskey or red-light districts." Hall straightened up. "Quite a place. I was sure this brew would show something along the lines of Terra's *eberthella typhi.* Or the Martian sand rot corkscrew."

"But the whole planet's harmless. You know, I'm wondering whether this is the Garden of Eden our ancestors fell out of."

"Were pushed out of."

Hall wandered over to the window of the lab and contemplated the scene beyond. He had to admit it was an attractive sight. Rolling forests and hills, green slopes alive with flowers and endless vines; waterfalls and hanging moss; fruit trees, acres of flowers, lakes. Every effort had been made to preserve intact the surface of Planet Blue — as it had been designated by the original scout ship, six months earlier.

Hall sighed. "Quite a place. I wouldn't mind coming back here again some time."

"Makes Terra seem a little bare." Friendly took out his cigarettes, then put them away again. "You know, the place has a funny effect on me. I don't smoke any more. Guess that's because of the way it looks. It's so —

so damn pure. Unsullied. I can't smoke or throw papers around. I can't bring myself to be a picnicker."

"The picnickers'll be along soon enough," Hall said. He went back to the microscope. "I'll try a few more cultures. Maybe I'll find a lethal germ yet."

"Keep trying." Lieutenant Friendly hopped off the table. "I'll see you later and find out if you've had any luck. There's a big conference going on in Room One. They're almost ready to give the go-ahead to the E.A. for the first load of colonists to be sent out."

"Picnickers!"

Friendly grinned. "Afraid so."

The door closed after him. His bootsteps echoed down the corridor. Hall was alone in the lab.

He sat for a time in thought. Presently he bent down and removed the slide from the stage of the microscope, selected a new one and held it up to the light to read the marking. The lab was warm and quiet. Sunlight streamed through the windows and across the floor. The trees outside moved a little in the wind. He began to feel sleepy.

"Yes, the picnickers," he grumbled. He adjusted the new slide into position. "And all of them ready to come in and cut down the trees, tear up the flowers, spit in the lakes, burn up the grass. With not even the common-cold virus around to —"

He stopped, his voice choked off —

Choked off because the two eyepieces of the microscope had twisted suddenly around his windpipe and were trying to strangle him. Hall tore at

them, but they dug relentlessly into his throat, steel prongs closing like the claws of a trap.

Throwing the microscope onto the floor, he leaped up. The microscope crawled quickly toward him, hooking around his leg. He kicked it loose with his other foot, and drew his blast pistol.

The microscope scuttled away, rolling on its coarse adjustments. Hall fired. It disappeared in a cloud of metallic particles.

"Good God!" Hall sat down weakly, mopping his face. "What the — ?" He massaged his throat. "What the hell!"

The council room was packed solid. Every officer of the Planet Blue unit was there. Commander Stella Morrison tapped on the big control map with the end of a slim plastic pointer.

"This long flat area is ideal for the actual city. It's close to water, and weather conditions vary sufficiently to give the settlers something to talk about. There are large deposits of various minerals. The colonists can set up their own factories. They won't have to do any importing. Over here is the biggest forest on the planet. If they have any sense, they'll leave it. But if they want to make newspapers out of it, that's not our concern."

She looked around the room at the silent men.

"Let's be realistic. Some of you have been thinking we shouldn't send the okay to the Emigration Authority, but keep the planet our own selves, to come back to. I'd like that as much as any of the rest of you, but we'd just get into a lot of trouble. It's not *our* planet. We're here to do a certain job. When the job is done, we move along. And it is almost done. So let's forget it. The only thing left to do is flash the go-ahead signal and then begin packing our things."

"Has the lab report come in on bacteria?" Vice-Commander Wood asked.

“We’re taking special care to look out for them, of course. But the last I heard nothing had been found. I think we can go ahead and contact the E.A. Have them send a ship to take us off and bring in the first load of settlers. There’s no reason why —” She stopped.

A murmur was swelling through the room. Heads turned toward the door.

Commander Morrison frowned. “Major Hall, may I remind you that when the council is in session no one is permitted to interrupt!”

Hall swayed back and forth, supporting himself by holding on to the door knob. He gazed vacantly around the council room. Finally his glassy eyes picked out Lieutenant Friendly, sitting halfway across the room.

“Come here,” he said hoarsely.

“Me?” Friendly sank farther down in his chair.

“Major, what is the meaning of this?” Vice-Commander Wood cut in angrily. “Are you drunk or are — ?” He saw the blast gun in Hall’s hand. “Is something wrong, Major?”

Alarmed, Lieutenant Friendly got up and grabbed Hall’s shoulder. “What is it? What’s the matter?”

“Come to the lab.”

“Did you find something?” The Lieutenant studied his friend’s rigid face. “What is it?”

“Come on.” Hall started down the corridor, Friendly following. Hall pushed the laboratory door open and stepped inside slowly.

“What it is?” Friendly repeated.

“My microscope.”

“Your microscope? What about it?” Friendly squeezed past him into the lab. “I don’t see it.”

“It’s gone.”

“Gone? Gone where?”

“I blasted it.”

“You blasted it?” Friendly looked at the other man. “I don’t get it. Why?”

Hall’s mouth opened and closed, but no sound came out.

“Are you all right?” Friendly asked in concern. Then he bent down and lifted a black plastic box from a shelf under the table. “Say, is this a gag?”

He removed Hall’s microscope from the box. “What do you mean, you blasted it? Here it is, in its regular place. Now, tell me what’s going on? You saw something on a slide? Some kind of bacteria? Lethal? Toxic?”

Hall approached the microscope slowly. It was his all right. There was the nick just above the fine adjustment. And one of the stage clips was slightly bent. He touched it with his finger.

Five minutes ago this microscope had tried to kill him. And he knew he had blasted it out of existence.

“You sure you don’t need a psych test?” Friendly asked anxiously. “You look post-trauma to me, or worse.”

“Maybe you’re right,” Hall muttered.

The robot psyche tester whirred, integrating and gestalting. At last its color-code lights changed from red to green.

“Well?” Hall demanded.

“Severe disturbance. Instability ratio up above ten.”

“That’s over danger?”

“Yes. Eight is danger. Ten is unusual, especially for a person of your index. You usually show about a four.”

Hall nodded wearily. “I know.”

“If you could give me more data — “

Hall set his jaw. “I can’t tell you any more.”

“It’s illegal to hold back information during a psyche test,” the machine said peevishly. “If you do that you deliberately distort my findings.”

Hall rose. “I can’t tell you any more. But you do record a high degree of unbalance for me?”

“There’s a high degree of psychic disorganization. But what it means, or why it exists, I can’t say.”

“Thanks.” Hall clicked the tester off. He went back to his own quarters. His head whirled. Was he out of his mind? But he had fired the blast gun at *something*. Afterward, he had tasted the atmosphere in the lab, and there

were metallic particles in suspension, especially near the place he had fired his blast gun at the microscope.

But how could a thing like that be? A microscope coming to life, trying to kill him!

Anyhow, Friendly had pulled it out of its box, whole and sound. But how had it got back in the box?

He stripped off his uniform and entered the shower. While he ran warm water over his body he meditated. The robot psyche tester had showed his mind was severely disturbed, but that could have been the result, rather than the cause, of the experience. He had started to tell Friendly about it but he had stopped. How could he expect anyone to believe a story like that?

He shut off the water and reached out for one of the towels on the rack.

The towel wrapped around his wrist, yanking him against the wall. Rough cloth pressed over his mouth and nose. He fought wildly, pulling away. All at once the towel let go. He fell, sliding to the floor, his head striking the wall. Stars shot around him; then violent pain.

Sitting in a pool of warm water, Hall looked up at the towel rack. The towel was motionless now, like the others with it. Three towels in a row, all exactly alike, all unmoving. Had he dreamed it?

He got shakily to his feet, rubbing his head. Carefully avoiding the towel rack, he edged out of the shower and into his room. He pulled a new towel from the dispenser in a gingerly manner. It seemed normal. He dried himself and began to put his clothes on.

His belt got him around the waist and tried to crush him. It was strong — it had reinforced metal links to hold his leggings and his gun. He and the belt rolled silently on the floor, struggling for control. The belt was like a

furious metal snake, whipping and lashing at him. At last he managed to get his hand around his blaster.

At once the belt let go. He blasted it out of existence and then threw himself down in a chair, gasping for breath.

The arms of the chair closed around him. But this time the blaster was ready. He had to fire six times before the chair fell limp and he was able to get up again.

He stood half dressed in the middle of the room, his chest rising and falling.

“It isn’t possible,” he whispered. “I must be out of my mind.”

Finally he got his leggings and boots on. He went outside into the empty corridor. Entering the lift, he ascended to the top floor.

Commander Morrison looked up from her desk as Hall stepped through the robot clearing screen. It pinged.

“You’re armed,” the Commander said accusingly.

Hall looked down at the blaster in his hand. He put it down on the desk. “Sorry.”

“What do you want? What’s the matter with you? I have a report from the testing machine. It says you’ve hit a ratio often within the last twenty-four hour period.” She studied him intently. “We’ve known each other for a long time, Lawrence. What’s happening to you?”

Hall took a deep breath. “Stella, earlier today, my microscope tried to strangle me.”

Her blue eyes widened. “What!”

“Then, when I was getting out of the shower, a bath towel tried to smother me. I got by it, but while I was dressing, my belt —” He stopped. The Commander had got to her feet.

“Guards!” she called.

“Wait, Stella.” Hall moved toward her. “Listen to me. This is serious. There’s nothing wrong. Four times things have tried to kill me. Ordinary objects suddenly turned lethal. Maybe it’s what we’ve been looking for. Maybe this is —”

“Your microscope tried to killed you?”

“It came alive. Its stem got me around the windpipe.”

There was a long silence. “Did anyone see this happen besides you?”

“No.”

“What did you do?”

“I blasted it.”

“Are there any remains?”

“No,” Hall admitted reluctantly. “As a matter of fact, the microscope seems to be all right, again. The way it was before. Back in its box.”

“I see.” The Commander nodded to the two guards who had answered her call. “Take Major Hall down to Captain Taylor and have him confined until he can be sent back to Terra for examination.”

She watched calmly as the two guards took hold of Hall's arms with magnetic grapples.

"Sorry, Major," she said. "Unless you can prove any of your story, we've got to assume it's a psychotic projection on your part. And the planet isn't well enough policed for us to allow a psychotic to run loose. You could do a lot of damage."

The guards moved him toward the door. Hall went unprotestingly. His head rang, rang and echoed. Maybe she was right. Maybe he was out of his mind.

They came to Captain Taylor's offices. One of the guards rang the buzzer.

"Who is it?" the robot door demanded shrilly.

"Commander Morrison orders this man put under the Captain's care."

There was a hesitant pause, then: "The Captain is busy."

"This is an emergency."

The robot's relays clicked while it made up its mind. "The Commander sent you?"

"Yes. Open up."

"You may enter," the robot conceded finally. It drew its locks back, releasing the door.

The guard pushed the door open. And stopped.

On the floor lay Captain Taylor, his face blue, his eyes gaping. Only his head and feet was visible. A red-and-white scatter rug was wrapped around him, squeezing, straining tighter and tighter.

Hall dropped to the floor and pulled at the rug. “Hurry!” he barked. “Grab it!”

The three of them pulled together. The rug resisted.

“Help,” Taylor cried weakly.

“We’re trying!” They tugged frantically. At last the rug came away in their hands. It flopped off rapidly toward the open door. One of the guards blasted it.

Hall ran to the vidscreen and shakily dialed the Commander’s emergency number.

Her face appeared on the screen.

“See!” he gasped.

She stared past him to Taylor lying on the floor, the two guards kneeling beside him, their blasters still out.

“What — what happened?”

“A rug attacked him.” Hall grinned without amusement. “Now who’s crazy?”

“We’ll send a guard unit down.” She blinked. “Right away. But how —”

“Tell them to have their blasters ready. And better make that a general alarm to *everyone.”*

Hall placed four items on Commander Morrison's desk: a microscope, a towel, a metal belt, and a small red-and-white rug.

She edged away nervously. "Major, are you sure — ?"

"They're all right, *now.* That's the strangest part. This towel. A few hours ago it tried to kill me. I got away by blasting it to particles. But here it is, back again. The way it always was. Harmless.

Captain Taylor fingered the red-and-white rug warily. "That's my rug. I brought it from Terra. My wife gave it to me. I — I trusted it completely."

They all looked at each other.

"We blasted the rug, too," Hall pointed out.

There was silence.

"Then what was it that attacked me?" Captain Taylor asked. "If it wasn't this rug?"

"It looked like this rug," Hall said slowly. "And what attacked me looked like this towel."

Commander Morrison held up the towel to the light. "It's just an ordinary towel! It couldn't have attacked you."

"Of course not," Hall agreed. "We've put these objects through all the tests we can think of. They're just what they're supposed to be, all elements unchanged. Perfectly stable non-organic objects. It's impossible that *any* of these could have come to life and attacked us."

"But something did." Taylor said. "Something attacked me. And it if wasn't this rug, what was it?"

Lieutenant Dodds felt around on the dresser for his gloves. He was in a hurry. The whole unit had been called to emergency assembly.

"Where did I — ?" he murmured. "What the hell!"

For on the bed were *two* pair of identical gloves, side by side.

Dodds frowned, scratching his head. How could it be? He owned only one pair. The others must be somebody else's. Bob Wesley had been in the night before, playing cards. Maybe he had left them.

The vidscreen flashed again. "All personnel, report at once. All personnel, report at once. Emergency assembly of all personnel."

"All right!" Dodds said impatiently. He grabbed up one of the pairs of gloves, sliding them onto his hands.

As soon as they were in place, the gloves carried his hands down to his waist. They clamped his fingers over the butt of his gun, lifting it from the holster.

"I'll be damned," Dodds said. The gloves brought the blast gun up, pointing it at his chest.

The fingers squeezed. There was a roar. Half of Dodd's chest dissolved. What was left of him fell slowly to the floor, the mouth still open in amazement.

Corporal Tenner hurried across the ground toward the main building as soon as he heard the wail of the emergency alarm.

At the entrance to the building he stopped to take off his metal-cleated boots. Then he frowned. By the door were two safety mats instead of one.

Well, it didn’t matter. They were both the same. He stepped onto one of the mats and waited. The surface of the mat sent a flow of high-frequency current through his feet and legs, killing any spores or seeds that might have clung to him while he was outside.

He passed on into the building.

A moment later Lieutenant Fulton hurried up to the door. He yanked off his hiking boots and stepped onto the first mat he saw.

The mat folded over his feet.

“Hey,” Fulton cried. “Let go!”

He tried to pull his feet loose, but the mat refused to let go. Fulton became scared. He drew his gun, but he didn’t care to fire at his own feet.

“Help!” he shouted.

Two soldiers came running up. “What’s the matter, Lieutenant?”

“Get this damn thing off me.”

The soldiers began to laugh.

“It’s no joke,” Fulton said, his face suddenly white. “It’s breaking my feet! It’s —”

He began to scream. The soldiers grabbed frantically at the mat. Fulton fell, rolling and twisting, still screaming. At last the soldiers managed to get a corner of the mat loose from his feet.

Fulton’s feet were gone. Nothing but limp bone remained, already half dissolved.

“Now we know,” Hall said grimly. “It’s a form of organic life.” Commander Morrison turned to Corporal Tenner. “You saw two mats when you came into the building?”

“Yes, Commander. Two. I stepped on — on one of them. And came in.”

“You were lucky. You stepped on the right one.”

“We’ve got to be careful,” Hall said. “We’ve got to watch for duplicates. Apparantly *it*, whatever it is, imitates objects it finds. Like a chameleon. Camouflage.”

“Two,” Stella Morrison murmured, looking at the two vases of flowers, one at each end of her desk. “It’s going to be hard to tell. Two towels, two vases, two chairs. There may be whole rows of things that are all right. All multiples legitimate except one.”

“That’s the trouble. I didn’t notice anything unusual in the lab. There’s nothing odd about another microscope. It blended right in.”

The Commander drew away from the identical vases of flowers. “How about those? Maybe one is — whatever they are.”

“There’s two of a lot of things. Natural pairs. Two boots. Clothing. Furniture. I didn’t notice that extra chair in my room. Equipment. It’ll be impossible to be sure. And sometimes —”

The vidscreen lit. Vice-Commander Wood’s features formed. “Stella, another casualty.”

“Who is it this time?”

“An officer dissolved. All but a few buttons and his blast pistol — Lieutenant Dodds.”

“That makes three,” Commander Morrison said.

“If it’s organic, there ought to be some way we can destroy it,” Hall muttered. “We’ve already blasted a few, apparently killed them. They *can* be hurt! But we don’t know how many more there are. We’ve destroyed five or six. Maybe it’s an infinitely divisible substance. Some kind of protoplasm.”

“And meanwhile — ?”

“Meanwhile we’re all at its mercy. Or *their* mercy. It’s our lethal life form, all right. That explains why we found everything else harmless. Nothing could compete with a form like this. We have mimic forms of our own, of course. Insects, plants. And there’s the twisty slug on Venus. But nothing that goes this far.”

“It can be killed, though. You said so yourself. That means we have a chance.”

“If it can be found.” Hall looked around the room. Two walking capes hung by the door. Had there been *two* a moment before?

He rubbed his forehead wearily. “We’ve got to try to find some sort of poison or corrosive agent, something that’ll destroy them wholesale. We can’t just sit and wait for them to attack us. We need something we can spray. That’s the way we got the twisty slugs.”

The Commander gazed past him, rigid.

He turned to follow her gaze. “What is it?”

“I never noticed two briefcases in the corner over there. There was only one before — I think.” She shook her head in bewilderment. “How are we going to know? This business is getting me down.”

“You need a good stiff drink.”

She brightened. “That’s an idea. But —”

“But what?”

“I don’t want to touch anything. There’s no way to tell.” She fingered the blast gun at her waist. “I keep wanting to use it, on everything.”

“Panic reaction. Still, we are being picked off, one by one.”

Captain Unger got the emergency call over his headphones. He stopped work at once, gathered the specimens he had collected in his arms, and hurried back toward the bucket.

It was parked closer than he remembered. He stopped, puzzled. There it was, the bright little cone-shaped car with its treads firmly planted in the soft soil, its door open.

Unger hurried up to it, carrying his specimens carefully. He opened the storage hatch in the back and lowered his armload. Then he went around to the front and slid in behind the controls.

He turned the switch. But the motor did not come on. That was strange. While he was trying to figure it out, he noticed something that gave him a start.

A few hundred feet away, among the trees, was a second bucket, just like the one he was in. And that *was* where he remembered having parked his car. Of course, he was in the bucket. Somebody else had come looking for specimens, and this bucket belonged to them.

Unger started to get out again.

The door closed around him. The seat folded up over his head. The dashboard became plastic and oozed. He gasped — he was suffocating. He struggled to get out, flailing and twisting. There was a wetness all around him, a bubbling, flowing wetness, warm like flesh.

“Glub.” His head was covered. His body was covered. The bucket was turning to liquid. He tried to pull his hands free but they would not come.

And then the pain began. He was being dissolved. All at once he realized what the liquid was.

Acid. Digestive acid. He was in a stomach.

“Don’t look!” Gail Thomas cried.

“Why not?” Corporal Hendricks swam toward her, grinning. “Why can’t I look?’

“Because I’m going to get out.”

The sun shone down on the lake. It glittered and danced on the water. All around huge moss-covered trees rose up, great silent columns among the flowering vines and bushes.

Gail climbed up on the bank, shaking water from her, throwing her hair back out of her eyes. The woods were silent. There was no sound except the lapping of the waves. They were a long way from the unit camp.

“When can I look?” Hendricks demanded, swimming around in a circle, his eyes shut.

“Soon.” Gail made her way into the trees, until she came to the place where she had left her uniform. She could feel the warm sun glowing against her bare shoulders and arms. Sitting down in the grass, she picked up her tunic and leggings.

She brushed the leaves and bits of tree bark from her tunic and began to pull it over her head.

In the water, Corporal Hendricks waited patiently, continuing in his circle. Time passed. There was no sound. He opened his eyes. Gail was nowhere in sight.

“Gail?” he called.

It was very quiet.

“Gail!”

No answer.

Corporal Hendricks swam rapidly to the bank. He pulled himself out of the water. One leap carried him to his own uniform, neatly piled at the edge of the lake. He grabbed up his blaster.

“Gail!”

The woods were silent. There was no sound. He stood, looking around him, frowning. Gradually, a cold fear began to numb him, in spite of the warm sun.

“GAIL!”

And still there was only silence.

Commander Morrison was worried. “We’ve got to act,” she said. “We can’t wait. Ten lives lost already from thirty encounters. One-third is too high a percentage.”

Hall looked up from his work. “Anyhow, now we know what we’re up against. It’s a form of protoplasm, with infinite versatility.” He lifted the spray tank. “I think this will give us an idea of how many exist.”

“What’s that?”

“A compound of arsenic and hydrogen in gas form. Arsine.”

“What are you going to do with it?”

Hall locked his helmet into place. His voice came through the Commander’s earphones. “I’m going to release this throughout the lab. I think there are a lot of them in here, more than anywhere else.”

“Why here?”

“This is where all samples and specimens were originally brought, where the first one of them was encountered. I think they came in with the samples, or as the samples, and then infiltrated through the rest of the buildings.”

The Commander locked her own helmet into place. Her four guards did the same. “Arsine is fatal to human beings, isn’t it?”

Hall nodded. “We’ll have to be careful. We can use it in here for a limited test, but that’s about all.”

He adjusted the flow of his oxygen inside his helmet.

“What’s your test supposed to prove?” she wanted to know.

“If it shows anything at all, it should give us an idea of how extensively they’ve infiltrated. We’ll know better what we’re up against. This may be more serious than we realize.”

“How do you mean?” she asked, fixing her own oxygen flow.

“There are a hundred people in this unit on Planet Blue. As it stands now, the worst that can happen is that they’ll get all of us, one by one. But that’s nothing. Units of a hundred are lost every day of the week. It’s a risk whoever is first to land on a planet must take. In the final analysis, it’s relatively unimportant.”

“Compared to what?”

“If they *are* infinitely divisible, then we’re going to have to think twice about leaving here. It would be better to stay and get picked off one by one than to run the risk of carrying any of them back to the system.”

She looked at him. “Is that what you’re trying to find out — whether they’re infinitely divisible?”

“I’m trying to find out what we’re up against. Maybe there are only a few of them. Or maybe they’re everywhere.” He waved a hand around the laboratory. “Maybe half the things in this room are not what we think they are… It’s bad when they attack us. It would be worse if they didn’t.”

“Worse?” The Commander was puzzled.

“Their mimicry is perfect. Of inorganic objects, at least. I looked through one of them, Stella, when it was imitating my microscope. It enlarged, adjusted, reflected, just like a regular microscope. It’s a form of mimicry that surpasses anything we’ve ever imagined. It carries down below the surface, into the actual elements of the object imitated.”

“You mean one of them could slip back to Terra along with us? In the form of clothing or a piece of lab equipment?” She shuddered.

“We assume they’re some sort of protoplasm. Such malleability suggests a simple original form — and that suggests binary fission. If that’s so, then there may be no limits to their ability to reproduce. The dissolving properties make me think of the simple unicellular protozoa.”

“Do you think they’re intelligent?”

“I don’t know. I hope not.” Hall lifted the spray. “In any case, this should tell us their extent. And, to some degree, corroborate my notion that they’re basic enough to reproduce by simple division — the worse thing possible, from our standpoint.

“Here goes,” Hall said.

He held the spray tightly against him, depressed the trigger, aimed the nozzle slowly around the lab. The commander and the four guards stood silently behind him. Nothing moved. The sun shone in through the windows, reflecting from the culture dishes and equipment.

After a moment he let the trigger up again.

“I didn’t see anything,” Commander Morrison said. “Are you sure you did anything?”

“Arsine is colorless. But don’t loosen your helmet. It’s fatal. And don’t move.”

They stood waiting.

For a time nothing happened. Then —

“Good God!” Commander Morrison exclaimed.

At the far end of the lab a slide cabinet wavered suddenly. It oozed, buckling and pitching. It lost its shape completely — a homogeneous

jellylike mass perched on top of the table. Abruptly, it flowed down the side of the table on to the floor, wobbling as it went.

"Over there!"

A bunsen burner melted and flowed along beside it. All around the room objects were in motion. A great glass retort folded up into itself and settled down into a blob. A rack of test tubes, a shelf of chemicals…

"Look out!" Hall cried, stepping back.

A huge bell jar dropped with a soggy splash in front of him. It was a single large cell, all right. He could dimly make out the nucleus, the cell wall, the hard vacuoles suspended in the cytoplasm.

Pipettes, tongs, a mortar, all were flowing now. Half the equipment in the room was in motion. They had imitated almost everything there was to imitate. For every microscope there was a mimic. For every tube and jar and bottle and flask…

One of the guards had his blaster out. Hall knocked it down. "Don't fire! Arsine is inflammable. Let's get out of here. We know what we wanted to know."

They pushed the laboratory door open quickly and made their way out into the corridor. Hall slammed the door behind them, bolting it tightly.

"Is it bad, then?" Commander Morrison asked.

"We haven't got a chance. The arsine disturbed them; enough of it might even kill them. But we haven't got that much arsine. And, if we could flood the planet, we wouldn't be able to use our blasters."

"Suppose we left the planet."

“We can’t take the chance of carrying them back to the system.”

“If we stay here we’ll be absorbed, dissolved, one by one,” the Commander protested.

“We could have arsine brought in. Or some other poison that might destroy them. But it would destroy most of the life on the planet along with them. There wouldn’t be much left.”

“Then we’ll have to destroy all life forms! If there’s no other way of doing it we’ve got to burn the planet clean. Even if there wouldn’t be a thing left but a dead world.”

They looked at each other.

“I’m going to call the System Monitor,” Commander Morrison said. “I’m going to get the unit off here, out of danger — all that are left, at least. That poor girl by the lake…” She shuddered. “After everyone’s out of here, we can work out the best way of cleaning up this planet.”

“You’ll run the risk of carrying one of them back to Terra?”

“Can they imitate us? Can they imitate living creatures? Higher life forms?”

Hall considered. “Apparently not. They seem to be limited to inorganic objects.”

The Commander smiled grimly. “Then we’ll go back without any inorganic material.”

“But our clothes! They can imitate belts, gloves, boots —”

“We’re not taking our clothes. We’re going back without anything. And I mean without anything *at all.”*

Hall’s lips twitched. “I see.” He pondered. “It might work. Can you persuade the personnel to — to leave all their things behind? Everything they own?”

“If it means their lives, I can *order* them to do it.”

“Then it might be our one chance of getting away.”

The nearest cruiser large enough to remove the remaining members of the unit was two hours’ distance away. It was moving Terraside again.

Commander Morrison looked up from the vidscreen. “They want to know what’s wrong here.”

“Let me talk.” Hall seated himself before the screen. The heavy features and gold braid of a Terran cruiser captain regarded him. “This is Major Lawrence Hall, from the Research Division of this unit.”

“Captain Daniel Davis.” Captain Davis studied him without expression. “You’re having some kind of trouble, Major?”

Hall licked his lips. “I’d rather not explain until we’re aboard, if you don’t mind.”

“Why not?”

“Captain, you’re going to think we’re crazy enough as it is. We’ll discuss everything fully once we’re aboard.” He hesitated. “We’re going to board your ship naked.”

The Captain raised an eyebrow. “Naked?”

“That’s right.”

“I see.” Obviously he didn’t.

“When will you get here?”

“In about two hours, I’d say.”

“It’s now 13:00 by our schedule. You’ll be here by 15:00?”

“At approximately that time,” the Captain agreed.

“We’ll be waiting for you. Don’t let any of your men out. Open one lock for us. We’ll board without any equipment. Just ourselves, nothing else. As soon as we’re aboard, remove the ship at once.”

Stella Morrison leaned toward the screen. “Captain, would it be possible — for your men to — ?”

“We’ll land by robot control,” he assured her. “None of my men will be on deck. No one will see you.”

“Thank you,” she murmured.

“Not at all.” Captain Davis saluted. “We’ll see you in about two hours then, Commander.”

“Let’s get everyone out onto the field,” Commander Morrison said. “They should remove their clothes here, I think, so there won’t be any objects on the field to come in contact with the ship.”

Hall looked at her face. “Isn’t it worth it to save our lives?”

Lieutenant Friendly bit his lips. “I won’t do it. I’ll stay here.”

“You have to come.”

“But, Major —”

Hall looked at his watch. “It’s 14:50. The ship will be here any minute. Get your clothes off and get out on the landing field.”

“Can’t I take anything at *all*?”

“Nothing. Not even your blaster… They’ll give us clothes inside the ship. Come on! Your life depends on this. Everyone else is doing it.”

Friendly tugged at his shirt reluctantly. “Well, I guess I’m acting silly.”

The vidscreen clicked. A robot voice announced shrilly: “Everyone out of the buildings at once! Everyone out of the buildings and on the field without delay! Everyone out of the buildings at once! Everyone —”

“So soon?” Hall ran to the window and lifted the metal blind. “I didn’t hear it land.”

Parked in the center of the landing field was a long gray cruiser, its hull pitted and dented from meteoric strikes. It lay motionless. There was no sign of life about it.

A crowd of naked people was already moving hesitantly across the field toward it, blinking in the bright sunlight.

“It’s here!” Hall started tearing off his shirt. “Let’s go!”

“Wait for me!”

“Then hurry.” Hall finished undressing. Both men hurried out into the corridor. Unclothed guards raced past them. They padded down the corridors through the long unit building, to the door. They ran downstairs, out onto the field. Warm sunlight beat down on them from the sky overhead. From all the unit buildings, naked men and women were pouring silently toward the ship.

“What a sight!” an officer said. “We’ll never be able to live it down.”

“But you’ll live, at least,” another said.

“Lawrence!”

Hall half turned.

“Please don’t look around. Keep on going. I’ll walk behind you.”

“How does it feel, Stella?” Hall asked.

“Unusual.”

“Is it worth it?”

“I suppose so.”

“Do you think anyone will believe us?”

“I doubt it,” she said. “I’m beginning to wonder myself.”

“Anyhow, we’ll get back alive.”

“I guess so.”

Hall looked up at the ramp being lowered from the ship in front of them. The first people were already beginning to scamper up the metal incline, into the ship, through the circular lock.

"Lawrence —"

There was a peculiar tremor in the Commander's voice. "Lawrence, I'm —"

"You're what?"

"I'm scared."

"Scared!" He stopped. "Why?"

"I don't know," she quavered.

People pushed against them from all sides. "Forget it. Carry-over from your early childhood." He put his foot on the bottom of the ramp. "Up we go."

"I want to go back!" There was panic in her voice. "I —"

Hall laughed. "It's too late now, Stella." He mounted the ramp, holding on to the rail. Around him, on all sides, men and women were pushing forward, carrying them up. They came to the lock. "Here we are."

The man ahead of him disappeared.

Hall went inside after him, into the dark interior of the ship, into the silent blackness before him. The Commander followed.

At exactly 15:00 Captain Daniel Davis landed his ship in the center of the field. Relays slid the entrance lock open with a bang. Davis and the

other officers of the ship sat waiting in the control cabin, around the big control table.

"Well," Captain Davis said, after a while. "Where are they?"

The officers became uneasy. "Maybe something's wrong."

"Maybe the whole damn thing's a joke?"

They waited and waited.

But no one came.

Prize Ship

General Thomas Groves gazed glumly up at the battle maps on the wall. The thin black line, the iron ring around Ganymede, was still there. He waited a moment, vaguely hoping, but the line did not go away. At last he turned and made his way out of the chart wing, past the rows of desks.

At the door Major Siller stopped him. “What’s wrong, sir? No change in the war?”

“No change.”

“What’ll we do?”

“Come to terms. Their terms. We can’t let it drag on another month. Everybody knows that. *They* know that.”

“Licked by a little outfit like Ganymede.”

“If only we had more time. But we don’t. The ships must be out in deep-space again, right away. If we have to capitulate to get them out, then let’s do it. Ganymede!” He spat. “If we could only break them. But by that time __”

“By that time the colonies won’t exist.”

“We have to get our cradles back in our own hands,” Groves said grimly. “Even if it takes capitulation to do it.”

“No other way will do?”

“You find another way.” Groves pushed past Siller, out into corridor. “And if you find it, let me know.”

The war had been going on for two Terran months, with no sign of a break. The System Senate's difficult position came from the fact that Ganymede was the jump-off point between the System and its precarious network of colonies at Proxima Centauri. All ships leaving the System for deep-space were launched from the immense space cradles on Ganymede. There were no other cradles. Ganymede had been agreed on as the jump-off point, and the cradles had been constructed there.

The Ganymedeans became rich, hauling freight and supplies in their tubby little ships. Over a period of time more and more Gany ships took to the sky, freighters and cruisers and patrol ships.

One day this odd fleet landed among the space cradles, killed and imprisoned the Terran and Martian guards, and proclaimed that Ganymede and the cradles were their property. If the Senate wanted to use the cradles they paid, and paid plenty. Twenty per cent of all freighted goods turned over to the Gany Emperor, left on the moon. And full Senate representation.

If the Senate fleet tried to take back the cradles by force the cradles would be destroyed. The Ganymedeans had already mined them with H-bombs. The Gany fleet surrounded the moon, a little ring of hard steel. If the Senate fleet tried to break through, seize the moon, it would be the end of the cradles. What could the System do?

And at Proxima, the colonies were starving.

"You're certain we can't launch ships into deep-space from regular fields," a Martian Senator asked.

"Only Class-One ships have any chance to reach the colonies," Commander James Carmichel said wearily. "A Class-One ship is ten times the size of a regular intra-system ship. A Class-One ship needs a cradle miles deep. Miles wide. You can't launch a ship that size from a meadow."

There was silence. The great Senate chambers were full, crowded to capacity with representatives from all the nine planets.

“The Proxima colonies won’t last another twenty days,” Doctor Basset testified. “That means we must get a ship on the way sometime next week. Otherwise, when we do get there we won’t find anyone alive.”

“When will the new Luna cradles be ready?”

“A month,” Carmichel answered.

“No sooner?”

“No.”

“Then apparently we’ll have to accept Ganymede’s terms.” The Senate Leader snorted with disgust. “Nine planets and one wretched little moon! How dare they want equal voice with the System members!”

“We could break their ring,” Carmichel said, “but they’ll destroy the cradles without hesitation if we do.”

“If only we could get supplies to the colonies without using space cradles,” a Plutonian Senator said.

“That would mean without using Class-One ships.”

“And nothing else will reach Proxima?”

“Nothing that we know of.”

A Saturnian Senator arose. “Commander, what kind of ships does Ganymede use? They’re different from your own?”

“Yes. But no one knows anything about them.”

“How are they launched?”

Carmichel shrugged. “The usual way. From fields.”

“Do you think —”

“I don’t think they’re deep-space ships. We’re beginning to grasp at straws. There simply is no ship large enough to cross deep-space that doesn’t require a space cradle. That’s the fact we must accept.”

The Senate Leader stirred. “A motion is already before the Senate that we accept the proposal of the Ganymedeans and conclude the war. Shall we take the vote, or are there any more questions?”

No one blinked his light.

“Then we’ll begin. Mercury. What is the vote of the First Planet?”

“Mercury votes to accept the enemy’s terms.”

“Venus. What does Venus vote?”

“Venus votes —”

“Wait!” Commander Carmichel stood up suddenly. The Senate Leader raised his hand.

“What is it? The Senate is voting.”

Carmichel gazed down intently at a foil strip that had been shot to him across the chamber, from the chart wing. “I don’t know how important this is, but I think perhaps the Senate should know about it before it votes.”

“What is it?”

“I have a message from the first line. A Martian raider has surprised and captured a Gany Research Station, on an asteroid between Mars and Jupiter. A large quantity of Gany equipment has been taken intact.” Carmichel looked around the hall. “Including a Gany ship, a new ship, undergoing tests at the Station. The Gany staff was destroyed, but the prize ship is undamaged. The raider is bringing it here so it can be examined by our experts.”

A murmur broke through the chamber.

“I put forth a motion that we withhold our decision until the Ganymedean ship has been examined,” a Uranian Senator shouted. “Something might come of this!”

“The Ganymedeans have put a lot of energy into designing ships,” Carmichel murmured to the Senate Leader. “Their ships are strange. Quite different from ours. Maybe… .”

“What is the vote on this motion?” the Senate Leader asked. “Shall we wait until this ship can be examined?”

“Let’s wait!” voices cried. “Wait! Let’s see.”

Carmichel rubbed his paw thoughtfully. “It’s worth a try. But if nothing comes of this we’ll have to go ahead and capitulate.” He folded up the foil strip. “Anyhow, it’s worth looking into. A Gany ship. I wonder… .”

Doctor Earl Basset’s face was red with exitement. “Let me by.” He pushed through the row of uniformed officers. “Please let me by.” Two shiny Lieutenants stepped out of his way and he saw, for the first time, the great globe of steel and rexenoid that was the captured Ganymedean ship.

“Look at it,” Major Siller whispered. “Nothing at all like our own ships. What makes it run?”

“No drive jets,” Commander Carmichel said. “Only landing jets to set her down. What makes her go?”

The Ganymedean globe rested quietly in the center of the Terran Experimental laboratory, rising up from the circle of men like a great bubble. It was a beautiful ship, glimmering with an even metallic fire, shimmering and radiating a cold light.

“It gives you a strange feeling,” General Groves said. Suddenly he caught his breath. “You don’t suppose this — this could be a gravity drive ship? The Ganys were supposed to be experimenting with gravity.”

“What’s that?” Basset said.

“A gravity drive ship would reach its destination without time lapse. The velocity of gravity is infinite. Can’t be measured. If this globe is —”

“Nonsense,” Carmichel said. “Einstein showed gravity isn’t a force but a warpage, a space warpage.”

“But couldn’t a ship be built using —”

“Gentlemen!” The Senate Leader came quickly into the laboratory, surrounded by his guards. “Is this the ship? This globe?” The officers pulled back and the Senate Leader went gingerly up to the great gleaming side. He touched it.

“It’s undamaged,” Siller said. “They’re translating the control markings so we can use it.”

“So this is the Ganymedean ship. Will it help us?”

“We don’t know yet,” Carmichel said.

“Here come the think-men,” Groves said. The hatch of the globe had opened, and two men in white lab uniforms were stepping carefully down, carrying a semantibox.

“What are the results?” the Senate Leader asked.

“We’ve made the translations. A Terran crew could operate the ship now. All the controls are marked.”

“We should make a study of the engines before we try the ship out,” Doctor Basset said. “What do we know about it? We don’t know what makes it run, or what fuel it uses.”

“How long will such a study take?” the Leader asked.

“Several days, at least,” Carmichel said.

“That long?”

“There’s no telling what we’ll run into. We may find a radically new type of drive and fuel. It might even take several weeks to finish the analysis.”

The Senate Leader pondered.

“Sir,” Carmichel said, “I think we should go ahead and have a test run. We can easily raise a volunteer crew.”

“A trial run could begin at once,” Groves said. “But we might have to wait weeks for the drive analysis.”

“You believe a complete crew would volunteer?”

Carmichel rubbed his hands together. “Don’t worry about that. Four men would do it. Three, outside of me.”

“Two,” General Groves said. “Count me in.”

“How about me, sir?” Major Siller asked hopefully.

Doctor Basset pushed up nervously. “Is it all right for a civilian to volunteer? I’m curious as hell about this.”

The Senate Leader smiled. “Why not? If you can be of use, go along. So the crew is already here.”

The four men grinned at each other.

“Well?” Groves said. “What are we waiting for? Let’s get her started!”

The linguist traced a meter reading with his finger. “You can see the Gany markings. Next to each we’ve put the Terran equivalent. There’s one hitch, though. We know the Gany word for, say, five. *Zahf*. So where we find *zahf* we mark a five for you. See this dial? Where the arrow’s at *nesi?* At zero. See how it’s marked?”

100	liw
50	ka
5	zahf
0	nesi
5	zahf

50 ka

100 liw

Carmichel nodded. “So?”

“This is the problem. We don’t know what the units refer to. Five, but five what? Fifty, but fifty what? Presumably velocity. Or is it distance? Since no study has been made of the workings of this ship —”

“You can’t interpret?”

“How?” The linguist tapped a switch. “Obviously, this throws the drive on. *Mel* — start. You close the switch and it indicates *io* — stop. But how you guide the ship is a different matter. We can’t tell you what the meter is for.”

Groves touched a wheel. “Doesn’t this guide her?”

“It governs the brake rockets, the landing jets. As for the central drive we don’t know what it is or how you control it, once you’re started. Semantics won’t help you. Only experience. We can translate numbers only into numbers.”

Groves and Carmichel looked at each other.

“Well?” Groves said. “We may find ourselves lost in space. Or falling into the sun. I saw a ship spiral into the sun, once. Faster and faster, down and down —”

“We’re a long way from the sun. And we’ll point her out, toward Pluto. We’ll get control eventually. You don’t want to unvolunteer, do you?”

“Of course not.”

“How about the rest of you?” Carmichel said, to Basset and Siller. “You’re still coming along?”

“Certainly.” Basset was stepping cautiously into his spacesuit. “We’re coming.”

“Make sure you seal your helmet completely.” Carmichel helped him fasten his leggings. “Your shoes, next.”

“Commander,” Groves said, “they’re finishing on the vidscreen. I wanted it installed so we could establish contact. We might need some help getting back.”

“Good idea.” Carmichel went over, examining the leads from the screen. “Self-contained power unit?”

“For safety’s sake. Independent from the ship.”

Carmichel sat down before the vidscreen, clicking it on. The local monitor appeared. “Get me the Garrison Station on Mars. Commander Vecchi.”

The call locked through. Carmichel began to lace his boots and leggings while he waited. He was lowering his helmet into place when the screen I glowed into life. Vecchi’s dark features formed, lean-jawed above his scarlet uniform.

“Greetings, Commander Carmichel,” he murmured. He glanced curiously at Carmichel’s suit. “You are going on a trip, Commander?”

“We may visit you. We’re about to take the captured Gany ship up. If everything goes right I hope to set her down at your field, sometime later today.”

“We’ll have the field cleared and ready for you.”

“Better have emergency equipment on hand. We’re still unsure of the controls.”

“I wish you luck.” Vecchi’s eyes flickered. “I can see the interior of your ship. What drive is it?”

“We don’t know yet. That’s the problem.”

“I hope you will be able to land, Commander.”

“Thanks. So do we.” Carmichel broke the connection. Groves and Siller were already dressed. They were helping Basset tighten the screw locks of his earphones.

“We’re ready,” Groves said. He looked through the port. Outside a circle of officers watched silently.

“Say good-bye,” Siller said to Basset. “This may be our last minute on Terra.”

“Is there really much danger?”

Groves sat down beside Carmichel at the control board. “Ready?” His voice came to Carmichel through his phones.

“Ready.” Carmichel reached out his gloved hand, toward the switch marked *mel.* “Here we go. Hold on tight!”

He grasped the switch firmly and pulled.

They were falling through space.

“Help!” Doctor Basset shouted. He slid across the upended floor, crashing against a table. Carmichel and Groves hung on grimly, trying to keep their places at the board.

The globe was spinning and dropping, settling lower and lower through a heavy sheet of rain. Below them, visible through the port, was a vast rolling ocean, an endless expanse of blue water, as far as the eye could see. Siller stared down at it, on his hands and knees, sliding with the globe.

“Commander, where — where should we be?”

“Someplace off Mars. But this can’t be Mars!”

Groves flipped the brake rocket switches, one after another. The globe shuddered as the rockets came on, bursting into life around them.

“Easy does it,” Carmichel said, craning his neck to see through the port. “Ocean? What the hell —”

The globe leveled off, shooting rapidly above the water, parallel to the surface. Siller got slowly to his feet, hanging onto the railing. He helped Basset up. “Okay, Doc?”

“Thanks.” Basset wobbled. His glasses had come off inside his helmet. “Where are we? On Mars already?’

“We’re there,” Groves said, “but it isn’t Mars.”

“But I thought we were going to Mars.”

“So did the rest of us.” Groves decreased the speed of the globe cautiously. “You can see this isn’t Mars.”

“Then what is it?”

“I don’t know. We’ll find out, though. Commander, watch the starboard jet. It’s overbalancing. Your switch.”

Carmichel adjusted. “Where do you think we are? I don’t understand it. Are we still on Terra? Or Venus?”

Groves flicked the vidscreen on. “I’ll soon find out if we’re on Terra.” He raised the all-wave control. The screen remained blank. Nothing formed.

“We’re not on Terra.”

“We’re not anywhere in the System.” Groves spun the dial. “No response.”

“Try the frequency of the big Mars Sender.”

Groves adjusted the dial. At the spot where the Mars Sender should have come in there was — nothing. The four men gaped foolishly at the screen. All their lives they had received the familiar sanguine faces of Martian announcers on that wave. Twenty-four hours a day. The most powerful sender in the System. Mars Sender reached all the nine planets, and even out into deep-space. And it was always on the air.

“Lord,” Basset said. “We’re out of the System.”

“We’re not in the System,” Groves said. “Notice the horizontal curve — This is a small planet we’re on. Maybe a moon. But it’s no planet or moon I’ve ever seen before. Not in the System, and not the Proxima area either.”

Carmichel stood up. “The units must be big multiples, all right. We’re out of the System, perhaps all the way around the galaxy.” He peered out the port at the rolling water.

“I don’t see any stars,” Basset said.

“Later on we can get a star reading. When we’re on the other side, away from the sun.”

“Ocean,” Siller murmured. “Miles of it. And a good temperature.” He removed his helmet cautiously. “Maybe we won’t need these after all.”

“Better leave them on until we can make an atmosphere check,” Groves said. “Isn’t there a check tube on this bubble?”

“I don’t see any,” Carmichel said.

“Well, it doesn’t matter. If we —”

“Sir!” Siller exclaimed. “Land.”

They ran to the port. Land was rising into view, on the horizon of the planet. A long low strip of land, a coastline. They could see green; the land was fertile.

“I’ll turn her a little right,” Groves said, sitting down at the board. He adjusted the controls. “How’s that?”

“Heading right toward it,” Carmichel sat down beside him. “Well, at least we won’t drown. I wonder where we are. How will we know? What if the star map can’t be equated? We can take a spectroscopic analysis, try to find a known star —”

“We’re almost there,” Basset said nervously. “You better slow us down, General. We’ll crash.”

“I’m doing the best I can. Any mountains or peaks?”

“No. It seems quite flat. Like a plain.”

The globe dropped lower and lower, slowing down. Green scenery whipped past below them. Far off a row of meager hills came finally into view. The globe was barely skimming, now, as the two pilots fought to bring it to a stop.

“Easy, easy,” Groves murmured. “Too fast.”

All the brakes were firing. The globe was a bedlam of noise, knocked back and forth as the jets fired. Gradually it lost velocity, until it was almost hanging in the sky. Then it sank, like a toy balloon, settling slowly down to the green plain below.

“Cut the rockets!”

The pilots snapped their switches. Abruptly all sound ceased. They looked at each other.

“Any moment…” Carmichel murmured.

Plop!

“We’re down,” Basset said. “We’re down.”

They unscrewed the hatch cautiously, their helmets tightly in place. Siller held a Boris gun ready, as Groves and Carmichel swung the heavy rexenoid disc back. A blast of warm air rolled into the globe, swelling around them.

“See anything?” Basset said.

“Nothing. Level fields. Some kind of planet.” The General stepped down onto the ground. “Tiny plants! Thousands of them. I don’t know what kind.”

The other men stepped out, their boots sinking into the moist soil. They looked around them.

“Which way?” Siller said. “Toward those hills?”

“Might as well. What a flat planet!” Carmichel strode off, leaving deep tracks behind him. The others followed.

“Harmless looking place,” Basset said. He picked a handful of the little plants. “What are they? Some kind of weed.” He stuffed them into the pocket of his spacesuit.

“Stop” Siller froze, rigid, his gun raised.

“What is it?”

“Something moved. Through that patch of shrubbery over there.”

They waited. Everything was quiet around them. A faint breeze eddied through the surface of green. The sky overhead was a clear, warm blue, with a few faint clouds.

“What did it look like?” Basset said.

“Some insect. Wait.” Siller crossed to the patch of plants. He kicked at them. All at once a tiny creature rushed out, scuttling away. Siller fired. The bolt from the Boris gun ignited the ground, a roar of white fire. When the cloud dissipated there was nothing but a seared pit.

“Sorry.” Siller lowered the gun shakily.

“It’s all right. Better to shoot first, on a strange planet.” Groves and Carmichel went on ahead, up a low rise.

“Wait for me,” Basset called. He fell behind the others. “I have something in my boot.”

“You can catch up.” The three went on, leaving the Doctor alone. He sat down on the moist ground, grumbling. He began to unlace his boot slowly, carefully.

Around him the air was warm. He sighed, relaxing. After a moment he removed his helmet and adjusted his glasses. Smells of plants and flowers were heavy in the air. He took a deep breath, letting it out again slowly. Then he put his helmet back on and finished lacing up his boot.

A tiny man, not six inches high, appeared from a clump of weeds and shot an arrow at him.

Basset stared down. The arrow, a minute splinter of wood, was sticking in the sleeve of his spacesuit. He opened and closed his mouth but no sounds came.

A second arrow glanced off the transparent shield of his helmet. Then a third and a fourth. The tiny man had been joined by companions, one of them on a tiny horse.

“Mother of Heaven!” Basset said.

“What’s the matter?” General Groves’ voice came in his earphones. “Are you all right, Doctor?”

“Sir, a tiny man just fired an arrow at me.”

“Really?”

“There’s — there’s a whole bunch of them, now.”

“Are you out of your mind?”

“No!” Basset scrambled to his feet. A volley of arrows rose up, sticking into his suit, glancing off his helmet. The shrill voices of the tiny men came to his ears, an excited, penetrating sound. “General, please come back here!”

Groves and Siller appeared at the top of the ridge. “Basset, you must be out of —”

They stopped, transfixed. Siller raised the Boris gun, but Groves pushed the muzzle down. “Impossible.” He advanced, staring down at the ground. An arrow pinged against his helmet. “Little men. With bows and arrows.”

Suddenly the little men turned and fled. They raced off, some on foot, some on horseback, back through the weeds and out the other side.

“There they go,” Siller said. “Should we follow them? See where they live?”

“It isn’t possible.” Groves shook his head. “No planet has yielded tiny human beings like this. So *small!”*

Commander Carmichel strode down the ridge to them. “Did I really see it? You men saw it, too? Tiny figures, racing away?”

Groves pulled an arrow from his suit. “We saw. And felt.” He held the arrow close to the plate of his helmet, examining it. “Look — the tip glitters. Metal tipped.”

“Did you notice their costumes?” Basset said. “In a storybook I once read. Robin Hood. Little caps, boots.”

“A story… .” Groves rubbed his jaw, a strange look suddenly glinting in his eyes. “A book.”

“What, sir?” Siller said.

“Nothing.” Groves came suddenly to life, moving away. “Let’s follow them. I want to see their city.”

He increased his pace, walking with great strides after the tiny men, who had not got very far off, yet.

“Come on,” Siller said. “Before they get away.” He and Carmichel and Basset followed behind Groves, catching up with him. The four of them kept pace with the tiny men, who were hurrying away as fast as they could. After a time one of the tiny men stopped, throwing himself down on the ground. The others hesitated, looking back.

“He’s tired out,” Siller said. “He can’t make it.”

Shrill squeaks rose. He was being urged on.

“Give him a hand,” Basset said. He bent down, picking the tiny figure up. He held him carefully between his gloved fingers, turning him around and around.

“Ouch!” He set him down quickly.

“What is it?” Groves came over.

“He stung me.” Basset massaged his thumb.

“Stung you?”

“Stabbed, I mean. With his sword.”

“You’ll be all right.” Groves went on, after the tiny figures.

“Sir,” Siller said to Carmichel, “this certainly makes the Ganymede problem seem remote.”

“It’s a long way off.”

“I wonder what their city will be like,” Groves said.

“I think I know,” Basset said.

“You know? How?”

Basset did not answer. He seemed to be deep in thought, watching the figures on the ground intently.

“Come on,” he said. “Let’s not lose them.”

They stood together, none of them speaking. Ahead, down a long slope, lay a miniature city. The tiny figures had fled into it, across a drawbridge. Now the bridge was rising, lifted by almost invisible threads. Even as they watched, the bridge snapped shut.

“Well, Doc?” Siller said. “This what you expected?”

Basset nodded. “Exactly.”

The city was walled, built of gray stone. It was surrounded by a little moat. Countless spires rose up, a conglomeration of peaks and gables, tops of buildings. There was furious activity going on inside the city. A cacophony of shrill sounds from countless throats drifted across the moat to the four men, growing louder each moment. At the walls of the city figures appeared, soldiers in armor, peering across the moat at them.

Suddenly the drawbridge quivered. It began to slide down, descending into position. There was a pause. Then —

“Look!” Groves exclaimed. “Here they come.”

Siller raised his gun. “My Lord! Look at them!”

A horde of armed men on horseback clattered across the drawbridge, spilling out onto the ground beyond. They came straight toward the four spacesuited men, the sun sparkling against their shields and spears. There were hundreds of them, decked with streamers and banners and pennants of all colors and sizes. An impressive sight, on a small scale.

“Get ready,” Carmichel said. “They mean business. Watch your legs.” He tightened the bolts of his helmet.

The first wave of horsemen reached Groves, who was standing a little ahead of the others. A ring of warriors surrounded him, little glittering armored and plumed figures, hacking furiously at his ankles with miniature swords.

“Cut it out!” Groves howled, leaping back. “Stop!”

“They’re going to give us trouble,” Carmichel said.

Siller began to giggle nervously, as arrows flew around him. “Shall I give it to them, sir? One blast from the Boris gun and —”

“No! Don’t fire — that’s an order.” Groves moved back as a phalanx of horses rushed toward him, spears lowered. He swung his leg, spilling them over with his heavy boot. A frantic mass of men and horses struggled to right themselves.

“Back,” Basset said. “Those damn archers.”

Countless men on foot were rushing from the city with long bows and quivers strapped to their backs. A chaos of shrill sound filled the air.

“He’s right,” Carmichel said. His leggings had been hacked clean through by determined knights who had dismounted and were swinging again and again, trying to chop him down. “If we’re not going to fire we better retreat. They’re tough.”

Clouds of arrows rained down on them.

“They know how to shoot,” Groves admitted. “These men are trained soldiers.”

“Watch out,” Siller said “They’re trying to get between us. Pick us off one by one.” He moved toward Carmichel nervously. “Let’s get out of here.”

“Hear them?” Carmichel said. “They’re mad. They don’t like us.”

The four men retreated, backing away. Gradually the tiny figures stopped following, pausing to reorganize their lines.

“It’s lucky for us we have our suits on,” Groves said. “This isn’t funny anymore.”

Siller bent down and pulled up a clump of weeds. He tossed the clump at the line of knights. They scattered.

“Let’s go,” Basset said. “Let’s leave.”

“Leave?”

“Let’s get out of here.” Basset was pale. “I can’t believe it. Must be some kind of hypnosis. Some kind of control of our minds. It can’t be real.”

Siller caught his arm. “Are you all right? What’s the matter?”

Basset's face was contorted strangely. "I can't accept it," he muttered thickly. "Shakes the whole fabric of the universe. All basic beliefs."

"Why? What do you mean?"

Groves put his hand on Basset's shoulder. "Take it easy, Doctor."

"But General —"

"I know what you're thinking. But it can't be. There must be some rational explanation. There has to be."

"A fairy tale," Basset muttered. "A story."

"Coincidence. The story was a social satire, nothing more. A social satire, a work of fiction. It just seems like this place. The resemblance is only —"

"What are you two talking about?" Carmichel said.

"This place." Bassett pulled away. "We've got to get out of here. We're caught in a mind web of some sort."

"What's he talking about?" Carmichel looked from Basset to Groves. "Do you know where we are?"

"We can't be there," Basset said.

'Where?"

"He made it up. A fairy tale. A child's tale."

"No, a social satire, to be exact," Groves said.

“What are they talking about, sir?” Siller said to Commander Carmichel. “Do you know?”

Carmichel grunted. A slow light dawned in his face. “What?”

“Do you know where we are, sir?”

“Let’s get back to the globe,” Carmichel said.

Groves paced nervously. He stopped by the port, looking out intently, peering into the distance.

“More coming?” Basset said.

“Lots more.”

“What are they doing out there *now?*”

“Still working on their tower.”

The little people were erecting a tower, a scaffolding up the side of the globe. Hundreds of them were working together, knights, archers, even women and boys. Horses and oxen pulling tiny carts were drawing supplies from the city. A shrill hubbub penetrated the rexenoid hull of the globe, filtering to the four men inside.

“Well?” Carmichel said. “What’ll we do? Go back?”

“I’ve had enough,” Groves said. “All I want now is to go back to Terra.”

“Where are we?” Siller demanded, for the tenth time. “Doc, you know. Tell me, damn it! All three of you know. Why won’t you say?”

“Because we want to keep our sanity,” Basset said, his teeth clenched. “That’s why.”

“I’d sure like to know,” Siller murmured. “If we went over in the corner would you tell me?”

Basset shook his head. “Don’t bother me, Major.”

“It just can’t be,” Groves said. “How *could* it be?”

“And if we leave, we’ll never know. We’ll never be sure. It’ll haunt us all our lives. Were we really — *here?* Does this place really exist? And is this place really —”

“There was a second place,” Carmichel said abruptly.

“A second place?”

“In the story. A place where the people were big.”

Basset nodded. “Yes. It was called — What?”

“Brobdingnag.”

“Brobdingnag. Maybe it exists, too.”

“Then you really think this is —”

“Doesn’t it fit his description?” Basset waved toward the port. “Isn’t that what he described? Everything small, tiny soldiers, little walled cities, oxen, horses, knights, kings, pennants. Drawbridge. Moat. And their damn towers. Always building towers — and shooting arrows.”

“Doc,” Siller said. “Whose description?”

No answer.

“Could — could you whisper it to me?”

“I don’t see how it can be,” Carmichel said flatly. “I remember the book, of course. I read it when I was a child, as we all did. Later on I realized it was a satire of the manners of the times. But good Lord, it’s either one or the other! Not a real place!”

“Maybe he had a sixth sense. Maybe he really was there. Here. In a vision. Maybe he had a vision. They say that he was supposed to have been psychotic, toward the end.”

“Brobdingnag. The other place.” Carmichel pondered. “If this exists, maybe that exists. It might tell us… We might know, for sure. Some sort of verification.”

“Yes, our theory. Hypothesis. We predict that it should exist, too. Its existence would be a kind of proof.”

“The *L* theory, which predicts the existence of *B*.”

“We’ve got to be sure,” Basset said. “If we go back without being sure, we’ll always wonder. When we’re fighting the Ganymedeans we’ll stop suddenly and wonder — was I really there? Does it really exist? All these years we thought it was just a story. But now —”

Groves walked over to the control board and sat down. He studied the dials intently. Carmichel sat down beside him.

“See this,” Groves said, touching the big central meter with his finger. “The reading is up to *liw*, 100. Remember where it was when we started?”

“Of course. At *nesi.* At zero. Why?”

“*Nesi* is neutral position. Our starting position, back on Terra. We’ve gone the limit one way. Carmichel, Basset is right. We’ve got to find out. We can’t go back to Terra without knowing if this really is… . *You know.”*

“You want to throw it back all the way? Not stop at zero? Go on to the other end? To the other *liw?”*

Groves nodded.

“All right.” The Commander let his breath out slowly. “I agree with you. I want to know, too. I have to know.”

“Doctor Basset.” Groves brought the Doctor over to the board. “We’re not going back to Terra, not yet. The two of us want to go on.”

“On?” Basset’s face twitched. “You mean on beyond? To the other side?”

They nodded. There was silence. Outside the globe the pounding and ringing had ceased. The tower had almost reached the level of the port.

“We must know,” Groves said.

“I’m for it,” Basset said.

“Good,” Carmichel said.

“I wish one of you would tell me what it is you’re talking about,” Siller said plaintively. “Can’t you tell me?”

“Then here goes.” Groves took hold of the switch. He held it for a moment, sitting silently. “Are we ready?”

“Ready,” Basset said.

Groves threw the switch, all the way down.

Shapes, enormous and confused.

The globe floundered, trying to right itself. Again they were falling, sliding about. The globe was lost in a sea of vague misty forms, immense dim figures that moved on all sides of them, beyond the port.

Basset stared out, his jaws slack. “What —”

Faster and faster the globe fell. Everything was diffused, unformed. Shapes like shadows drifted and flowed outside, shapes so huge that their outlines were lost.

“Sir!” Siller muttered. “Commander! Hurry! Look!”

Carmichel made his way to the port.

They were in a world of giants. A towering figure walked past them, a torso so large that they could see only a portion of it. There were other shapes, but so vast and dim they could not be identified. All around the globe was a roaring, a deep undercurrent of sound like the waves of a monstrous ocean. An echoing sound, a booming that tossed and bounced the globe around and around.

Groves looked up at Basset and Carmichel.

“Then it’s true,” Basset said.

“This confirms it.”

“I can’t believe it,” Carmichel said. “But this is the proof we asked for. Here it is — out there.”

Outside the globe something was coming closer, coming ponderously toward them. Siller gave a sudden shout, moving back from the port. He grabbed up the Boris gun, his face ashen.

“Groves!” Basset cried. “Throw it to neutral! Quick! We’ve got to get away.”

Carmichel pushed Siller’s gun down. He grinned fixedly at him. “Sorry. This time it’s too small.”

A hand was reached toward them, a hand so large that it blotted out the light. Fingers, skin with gaping pores, nails, great tufts of hair. The globe shuddered as the hand closed around them from all sides.

“General! Quick!”

Then it was gone. The pressure ceased, winking out. Beyond the port was — nothing. The dials were in motion again, the pointer rising up toward *nesi*. Toward neutral. Toward Terra.

Basset breathed a sigh of relief. He removed his helmet and mopped his forehead.

“We got away,” Groves said. “Just in time.”

“A hand,” Siller said. “Reaching for us. A big hand. Where were we? Tell me!”

Carmichel sat down beside Groves. They looked silently at each other.

Carmichel grunted. “We mustn’t tell anyone. No one. They wouldn’t believe us, and anyhow, it would be very damaging if they did. A society

can’t learn something like this. Too much would totter.”

“He must have seen it in a vision. Then he wrote it up as a children’s story. He knew he could never put it down as fact.”

“Something like that. So it really exists. Both exist. And perhaps others. Wonderland, Oz, Pellucidar, Erewhon, all the fantasies, dreams —”

Groves put his hand on the Commander’s arm. “Take it easy. We’ll simply tell them the ship didn’t work. As far as they’re concerned we didn’t go anywhere. Right?”

“Right.” Already, the vidscreen was sputtering, coming to life. An image was forming. “Right. We won’t say anything. Just the four of us will know.” He glanced at Siller. “Just the three of us, I mean.”

On the vidscreen the image of the Senate Leader was fully formed. “Commander Carmichel! Are you safe? Were you able to land? Mars sent us no report. Is your crew all right?”

Basset peered out the port. “We’re hanging about a mile up from the city. Terra City. Dropping slowly down. The sky is full of ships. We don’t need help, do we?”

“No,” Carmichel said. He began to fire the brake rocket slowly, easing the ship down.

“Someday, when the war is over,” Basset said, “I want to ask the Ganymedeans about this. I’d like to find out the whole story.”

“Maybe you’ll get your chance,” Groves said, suddenly sobered. “That’s right. Ganymede! Our chance to win the war certainly fizzled.”

“The Senate Leader is going to be disappointed,” Carmichel said grimly. “You may get your wish very soon, Doctor. The war will probably be over

shortly, now that we're back — empty handed."

The slender yellow Ganymedean moved slowly into the room, his robes slithering across the floor after him. He stopped, bowing.

Commander Carmichel nodded stiffly.

"I was told to come here," the Ganymedean lisped softly. "They tell me that some of our property is in this laboratory."

"That's right."

"If there are no objections, we would like to —"

"Go ahead and take it."

"Good. I am glad to see there is no animosity on your part. Now that we are all friends again, I hope that we can work together in harmony, on an equal basis of —"

Carmichel turned abruptly away, walking toward the door. "Your property is this way. Come along."

The Ganymedean followed him into the central lab building. There, resting silently in the center of the vast room, was the globe.

Groves came over. "I see they've come for it."

"Here it is," Carmichel said to the Ganymedean. "Your spaceship. Take it."

"Our time ship, you mean."

Groves and Carmichel jerked. “Your *what?*”

The Ganymedean smiled quietly. “Our time ship.” He indicated the globe. “There it is. May I begin moving it onto our transport?”

“Get Basset,” Carmichel said. “Quick!”

Groves hurried from the room. A moment later he returned with Doctor Basset.

“Doctor, this Gany is after his property.” Carmichel took a deep breath. “His — his time machine.”

Basset leaped. “His *what?* His time machine?” His face twitched. Suddenly he backed away. “This? A time machine? Not what we — Not —”

Groves calmed himself with an effort. He addressed the Ganymedean as casually as he could, standing to one side, a little dismayed. “May we ask you a couple of questions before you take your — your time ship?”

“Of course. I will answer as best I can.”

“This globe. It — it goes through time? Not space? It’s a time machine? Goes into the past? Into the future?”

“That is correct.”

“I see. And *nesi* on the dial, that’s the present.”

“Yes.”

“The upward reading is the past?”

“Yes.”

“The downward reading is the future, then. One more thing. Just one more. A person going back into the past would find that because of the expansion of the universe —”

The Ganymedean reacted. A smile crossed his face, a subtle, knowing smile. “Then you have tried out the ship?”

Groves nodded.

“You went into the past and found everything much smaller? Reduced in size?”

“That’s right — because the universe is expanding! And the future. Everything increased in size. Expanded.”

“Yes.” The Ganymedean’s smile broadened. “It is a shock, is it not? You are astonished to find your world reduced in size, populated by minute beings. But size, of course, is relative. As you discover when you go into the future.”

“So that’s it.” Groves let out his breath. “Well, that’s all. You can have your ship.”

“Time travel,” the Ganymedean said regretfully, “is not a successful undertaking. The past is too small, the future too expanded. We considered this ship a failure.”

The Gany touched the globe with his feeler.

“We could not imagine why you wanted it. It was even suggested that you stole the ship to use —” the Gany smiled — “to use to reach your colonies in deep-space. But that would have been *too* amusing. We could not really believe that.”

No one said anything.

The Gany made a whistling signal. A work crew came filing in and began to load the globe onto an enormous flat truck.

“So that’s it,” Groves muttered. “It was Terra all the time. And those people, they were our ancestors.”

“About fifteenth century,” Basset said. “Or so I’d say by their costumes. Middle Ages.”

They looked at each other.

Suddenly Carmichel laughed. “And we thought it was — We thought we were at —”

“I knew it was only a child’s story,” Basset said.

“A social satire,” Groves corrected him.

Silently they watched the Ganymedeans trundle their globe out of the building, onto the waiting cargo ship.

Nanny

“When I look back,” Mary Fields said, “I marvel that we ever could have grown up without a Nanny to take care of us.”

There was no doubt that Nanny had changed the whole life of the Fields’s house since she had come. From the time the children opened their eyes in the morning to their last sleepy nod at night, Nanny was in there with them, watching them, hovering about them, seeing that all their wants were taken care of.

Mr. Fields knew, when he went to the office, that his kids were safe, perfectly safe. And Mary was relieved of a countless procession of chores and worries. She did not have to wake the children up, dress them, see that they were washed, ate their meals, or anything else. She did not even have to take them to school. And after school, if they did not come right home, she did not have to pace back and forth in anxiety, worried that something had happened to them.

Not that Nanny spoiled them, of course. When they demanded something absurd or harmful (a whole storeful of candy, or a policeman’s motorcycle) Nanny’s will was like iron. Like a good shepherd she knew when to refuse the flock its wishes.

Both children loved her. Once, when Nanny had to be sent to the repair shop, they cried and cried without stopping. Neither their mother nor their father could console them. But at last Nanny was back again, and everything was all right. And just in time! Mrs. Fields was exhausted.

“Lord,” she said, throwing herself down. “What would we do without her?”

Mr. Fields looked up. “Without who?”

“Without Nanny.”

“Heaven only knows,” Mr. Fields said. After Nanny had aroused the children from sleep — by emitting a soft, musical whirr a few feet from their heads — she made certain that they were dressed and down at the breakfast table promptly, with faces clean and dispositions unclouded. If they were cross Nanny allowed them the pleasure of riding downstairs on her back.

Coveted pleasure! Almost like a roller coaster, with Bobby and Jean hanging on for dear life and Nanny flowing down step by step in the funny rolling way she had.

Nanny did not prepare breakfast, of course. That was all done by the kitchen. But she remained to see that the children ate properly and then, when breakfast was over, she supervised their preparations for school. And after they had got their books together and were all brushed and neat, her most important job: seeing that they were safe on the busy streets.

There were many hazards in the city, quite enough to keep Nanny watchful. The swift rocket cruisers that swept along, carrying businessmen to work. The time a bully had tried to hurt Bobby. One quick push from Nanny’s starboard grapple and away he went, howling for all he was worth. And the time a drunk started talking to Jean, with heaven knows *what* in mind. Nanny tipped him into the gutter with one nudge of her powerful metal side.

Sometimes the children would linger in front of a store. Nanny would have to prod them gently, urging them on. Or if (as sometimes happened) the children were late to school, Nanny would put them on her back and fairly speed along the sidewalk, her treads buzzing and flapping at a great rate.

After school Nanny was with them constantly, supervising their play, watching over them, protecting them, and at last, when it began to get dark

and late, dragging them away from their games and turned in the direction of home.

Sure enough, just as dinner was being set on the table, there was Nanny, herding Bobby and Jean in through the front door, clicking and whirring admonishingly at them. Just in time for dinner! A quick run to the bathroom to wash their faces and hands.

And at night —

Mrs. Fields was silent, frowning just a little. At night … “Tom?” she said.

Her husband looked up from his paper. “What?”

“I’ve been meaning to talk to you about something. It’s very odd, something I don’t understand. Of course, I don’t know anything about mechanical things. But Tom, at night when we’re all asleep and the house is quiet, Nanny —”

There was a sound.

“Mommy!” Jean and Bobby came scampering into the living room, their faces flushed with pleasure. “Mommy, we raced Nanny all the way home, and we won!”

“We won,” Bobby said. “We beat her.”

“We ran a lot faster than she did,” Jean said.

“Where is Nanny, children?” Mrs. Fields asked.

“She’s coming. Hello, Daddy.”

“Hello, kids,” Tom Fields said. He cocked his head to one side, listening. From the front porch came an odd scraping sound, an unusual whirr and scrape. He smiled.

“That’s Nanny,” Bobby said.

And into the room came Nanny.

Mr. Fields watched her. She had always intrigued him. The only sound in the room was her metal treads, scraping against the hardwood floor, a peculiar rhythmic sound. Nanny came to a halt in front of him, stopping a few feet away. Two unwinking photocell eyes appraised him, eyes on flexible wire stalks. The stalks moved speculatively, weaving slightly. Then they withdrew.

Nanny was built in the shape of a sphere, a large metal sphere, flattened on the bottom. Her surface had been sprayed with a dull green enamel, which had become chipped and gouged through wear. There was not much visible in addition to the eye stalks. The treads could not be seen. On each side of the hull was the outline of a door. From these the magnetic grapples came, when they were needed. The front of the hull came to a point, and there the metal was reinforced. The extra plates welded both fore and aft made her look almost like a weapon of war. A tank of some land. Or a ship, a rounded metal ship that had come up on land. Or like an insect. A sowbug, as they are called.

“Come on!” Bobby shouted.

Abruptly Nanny moved, spinning slightly as her treads gripped the floor and turned her around. One of her side doors opened. A long metal rod shot out. Playfully, Nanny caught Bobby’s arm with her grapple and drew him to her. She perched him on her back. Bobby’s legs straddled the metal hull. He kicked with his heels excitedly, jumping up and down.

“Race you around the block!” Jean shouted. “Giddup!” Bobby cried. Nanny moved away, out of the room with him. A great round bug of

whirring metal and relays, clicking photocells and tubes. Jean ran beside her. There was silence. The parents were alone again. “Isn’t she amazing?” Mrs. Fields said. “Of course, robots are a common sight these days. Certainly more so than a few years ago. You see them everywhere you go, behind counters in stores, driving buses, digging ditches —”

“But Nanny is different,” Tom Fields murmured.

“She’s — she’s not like a machine. She’s like a person. A living person. But after all, she’s much more complex than any other kind. She has to be. They say she’s even more intricate than the kitchen.”

“We certainly paid enough for her,” Tom said.

“Yes,” Mary Fields murmured. “She’s very much like a living creature.” There was a strange note in her voice. “Very much so.”

“She sure takes care of the kids,” Tom said, returning to his newspaper.

“But I’m worried.” Mary put her coffee cup down, frowning. They were eating dinner. It was late. The two children had been sent up to bed. Mary touched her mouth with her napkin. “Tom, I’m worried. I wish you’d listen to me.”

Tom Fields blinked. “Worried? What about?”

“About her. About Nanny.”

“Why?”

“I — I don’t know.”

“You mean we’re going to have to repair her again? We just got through fixing her. What is it this time? If those kids didn’t get her to —”

“It’s not that.”

“What, then?”

For a long time his wife did not answer. Abruptly she got up from the table and walked across the room to the stairs. She peered up, staring into the darkness. Tom watched her, puzzled.

“What’s the matter?”

“I want to be sure she can’t hear us.”

“She? Nanny?”

Mary came toward him. “Tom, I woke up last night again. Because of the sounds. I heard them again, the same sounds, the sounds I heard before. And you told me it didn’t mean anything!”

Tom gestured. “It doesn’t. What does it mean?”

“I don’t know. That’s what worries me. But after we’re all asleep she comes downstairs. She leaves their room. She slips down the stairs as quietly as she can, as soon as she’s sure we’re all asleep.”

“But why?”

“I don’t know! Last night I heard her going down, slithering down the stairs, as quiet as a mouse. I heard her moving around down here. And then —”

“Then what?”

“Tom, then I heard her go out the back door. Out, outside the house. She went into the back yard. That was all I heard for awhile.”

Tom rubbed his jaw. “Go on.”

“I listened. I sat up in bed. You were asleep, of course. Sound asleep. No use trying to wake you. I got up and went to the window. I lifted the shade and looked out. She was out there, out in the back yard.”

“What was she doing?”

“I don’t know.” Mary Fields’s face was lined with worry. “I don’t know! What in the world *would* a Nanny be doing outside at night, in the back yard?”

It was dark. Terribly dark. But the infrared filter clicked into place, and the darkness vanished. The metal shape moved forward, easing through the kitchen, its treads half-retracted for greatest quiet. It came to the back door and halted, listening.

There was no sound. The house was still. They were all asleep upstairs. Sound asleep.

The Nanny pushed, and the back door opened. It moved out onto the porch, letting the door close gently behind it. The night air was thin and cold. And full of smells, all the strange, tingling smells of the night, when spring has begun to change into summer, when the ground is still moist and the hot July sun has not had a chance to kill all the little growing things.

The Nanny went down the steps, onto the cement path. Then it moved cautiously onto the lawn, the wet blades of grass slapping its sides. After a time it stopped, rising up on its back treads. Its front part jutted up into the air. Its eye stalks stretched, rigid and taut, waving very slightly. Then it settled back down and continued its motion forward.

It was just going around the peach tree, coming back toward the house, when the noise came.

It stopped instantly, alert. Its side doors fell away and its grapples ran out their full lengths, lithe and wary. On the other side of the board fence, beyond the row of shasta daisies, something had stirred. The Nanny peered, clicking filters rapidly. Only a few faint stars winked in the sky overhead. But it saw, and that was enough.

On the other side of the fence a second Nanny was moving, making its way softly through the flowers, coming toward the fence. It was trying to make as little noise as possible. Both Nannies stopped, suddenly unmoving, regarding each other-the green Nanny waiting in its own yard, the blue prowler that had been coming toward the fence.

The blue prowler was a larger Nanny, built to manage two young boys. Its sides were dented and warped from use, but its grapples were still strong and powerful. In addition to the usual reinforced plates across its nose there was a gouge of tough steel, a jutting jaw that was already sliding into position, ready and able.

Mecho-Products, its manufacturer, had lavished attention on this jaw-construction. It was their trademark, their unique feature. Their ads, their brochures, stressed the massive frontal scoop mounted on all their models. And there was an optional assist: a cutting edge, power-driven, that at extra cost could easily be installed in their “Luxury-line” models.

This blue Nanny was so equipped.

Moving cautiously ahead, the blue Nanny reached the fence. It stopped and carefully inspected the boards. They were thin and rotted, put up a long time ago. It pushed its hard head against the wood. The fence gave, splintering and ripping. At once the green Nanny rose on its back treads, its grapples leaping out. A fierce joy filled it, a bursting excitement. The wild frenzy of battle.

The two closed, rolling silently on the ground, their grapples locked. Neither made any noise, the blue Mecho-Products Nanny nor the smaller,

lighter, pale-green Service Industries, Inc., Nanny. On and on they fought, hugged tightly together, the great jaw trying to push underneath, into the soft treads. And the green Nanny trying to hook its metal point into the eyes that gleamed fitfully against its side. The green Nanny had the disadvantage of being a medium-priced model; it was outclassed and outweighed. But it fought grimly, furiously.

On and on they struggled, rolling in the wet soil. Without sound of any kind. Performing the wrathful, ultimate task for which each had been designed.

“I can’t imagine,” Mary Fields murmured, shaking her head. “I just don’t know.”

“Do you suppose some animal did it?” Tom conjectured. “Are there any big dogs in the neighborhood?”

“No. There was a big red Irish setter, but they moved away, to the country. That was Mr. Petty’s dog.”

The two of them watched, troubled and disturbed. Nanny lay at rest by the bathroom door, watching Bobby to make sure he brushed his teeth. The green hull was twisted and bent. One eye had been shattered, the glass knocked out, splintered. One grapple no longer retracted completely; it hung forlornly out of its little door, dragging uselessly.

“I just don’t understand,” Mary repeated. “I’ll call the repair place and see what they say. Tom, it must have happened sometime during the night. While we were asleep. The noises I heard —”

“Shhh,” Tom muttered warningly. Nanny was coming toward them, away from the bathroom. Clicking and whirring raggedly, she passed them, a limping green tub of metal that emitted an unrhythmic, grating sound. Tom and Mary Fields unhappily watched her as she lumbered slowly into the living room. “I wonder,” Mary murmured.

“Wonder what?”

“I wonder if this will happen again.” She glanced up suddenly at her husband, eyes full of worry. “You know how the children love her … and they need her so. They just wouldn’t be safe without her. Would they?”

“Maybe it won’t happen again,” Tom said soothingly. “Maybe it was an accident.” But he didn’t believe it; he knew better. What had happened was no accident.

From the garage he backed his surface cruiser, maneuvered it until its loading entrance was locked against the rear door of the house. It took only a moment to load the sagging, dented Nanny inside; within ten minutes he was on his way across town to the repair and maintenance department of Service Industries, Inc.

The serviceman, in grease-stained white overalls, met him at the entrance. “Troubles?” he asked wearily; behind him, in the depths of the block-long building, stood rows of battered Nannies, in various stages of disassembly. “What seems to be the matter this time?”

Tom said nothing. He ordered the Nanny out of the cruiser and waited while the serviceman examined it for himself.

Shaking his head, the serviceman crawled to his feet and wiped grease from his hands. “That’s going to run into money,” he said. “The whole neural transmission’s out.”

His throat dry, Tom demanded: “Ever seen anything like this before? It didn’t break; you know that. It was demolished.”

“Sure,” the serviceman agreed tonelessly. “It pretty much got taken down a peg. On the basis of those missing chunks —” He indicated the dented anterior hull-sections. “I’d guess it was one of Mecho’s new jaw-models.”

Tom Fields's blood stopped moving in his veins. "Then this isn't new to you," he said softly, his chest constricting. "This goes on all the time."

"Well, Mecho just put out that jaw-model. It's not half bad … costs about twice what this model ran. Of course," the serviceman added thoughtfully, "we have an equivalent. We can match their best, and for less money."

Keeping his voice as calm as possible, Tom said: "I want this one fixed. I'm not getting another."

"I'll do what I can. But it won't be the same as it was. The damage goes pretty deep. I'd advise you to trade it in-you can get damn near what you paid. With the new models coming out in a month or so, the salesmen are eager as hell to —"

"Let me get this straight." Shakily, Tom Fields lit up a cigarette. "You people really don't want to fix these, do you? You want to sell brand-new ones, when these break down." He eyed the repairman intently. "Break down, or are knocked down."

The repairman shrugged. "It seems like a waste of time to fix it up. It's going to get finished off, anyhow, soon." He kicked the misshapen green hull with his boot. "This model is around three years old. Mister, it's obsolete."

"Fix it up," Tom grated. He was beginning to see the whole picture; his self-control was about to snap. "I'm not getting a new one! I want this one fixed!"

"Sure," the serviceman said, resigned. He began making out a work-order sheet. "We'll do our best. But don't expect miracles."

While Tom Fields was jerkily signing his name to the sheet, two more damaged Nannies were brought into the repair building.

“When can I get it back?” he demanded.

“It’ll take a couple of days,” the mechanic said, nodding toward the rows of semi-repaired Nannies behind him. “As you can see,” he added leisurely, “we’re pretty well full-up.”

“I’ll wait,” Tom said tautly. “Even if it takes a month.”

“Let’s go to the park!” Jean cried.

So they went to the park.

It was a lovely day, with the sun shining down hotly and the grass and flowers blowing in the wind. The two children strolled along the gravel path, breathing the warm-scented air, taking deep breaths and holding the presence of roses and hydrangeas and orange blossoms inside them as long as possible. They passed through a swaying grove of dark, rich cedars. The ground was soft with mold underfoot, the velvet, moist fur of a living world beneath their feet. Beyond the cedars, where the sun returned and the blue sky flashed back into being, a great green lawn stretched out.

Behind them Nanny came, trudging slowly, her treads clicking noisily. The dragging grapple had been repaired, and a new optic unit had been installed in place of the damaged one. But the smooth coordination of the old days was lacking; and the clean-cut lines of her hull had not been restored. Occasionally she halted, and the two children halted, too, waiting impatiently for her to catch up with them.

“What’s the matter, Nanny?” Bobby asked her.

“Something’s wrong with her,” Jean complained. “She’s been all funny since last Wednesday. Real slow and funny. And she was gone, for awhile.”

“She was in the repair shop,” Bobby announced. “I guess she got sort of tired. She’s old, Daddy says. I heard him and Mommy talking.”

A little sadly they continued on, with Nanny painfully following. Now they had come to benches placed here and there on the lawn, with people languidly dozing in the sun. On the grass lay a young man, a newspaper over his face, his coat rolled up under his head. They crossed carefully around him, so as not to step on him.

“There’s the lake!” Jean shouted, her spirits returning.

The great field of grass sloped gradually down, lower and lower. At the far end, the lowest end, lay a path, a gravel trail, and beyond that, a blue lake. The two children scampered excitedly, filled with ancitipation. They hurried faster and faster down the carefully-graded slope, Nanny struggling miserably to keep up with them.

“The lake!”

“Last one there’s a dead Martian stinko-bug!”

Breathlessly, they rushed across the path, onto the tiny strip of green bank against which the water lapped. Bobby threw himself down on his hands and knees, laughing and panting and peering down into the water. Jean settled down beside him, smoothing her dress tidily into place. Deep in the cloudy-blue water some tadpoles and minnows moved, minute artificial fish too small to catch.

At one end of the lake some children were floating boats with flapping white sails. At a bench a fat man sat laboriously reading a book, a pipe jammed in his mouth. A young man and woman strolled along the edge of the lake together, arm in arm, intent on each other, oblivious of the world around them.

“I wish we had a boat,” Bobby said wistfully.

Grinding and clashing, Nanny managed to make her way across the path and up to them. She stopped, settling down, retracting her treads. She did not stir. One eye, the good eye, reflected the sunlight. The other had not been synchronized; it gaped with futile emptiness. She had managed to shift most of her weight on her less-damaged side, but her motion was bad and uneven, and slow. There was a smell about her, an odor of burning oil and friction.

Jean studied her. Finally she patted the bent green side sympathetically. “Poor Nanny! What did you do, Nanny? What happened to you? Were you in a wreck?”

“Let’s push Nanny in,” Bobby said lazily. “And see if she can swim. Can a Nanny swim?”

Jean said no, because she was too heavy. She would sink to the bottom and they would never see her again.

“Then we won’t push her in,” Bobby agreed.

For a time there was silence. Overhead a few birds fluttered past, plump specks streaking swiftly across the sky. A small boy on a bicycle came riding hesitantly along the gravel path, his front wheel wobbling.

“I wish I had a bicycle,” Bobby murmured.

The boy careened on past. Across the lake the fat man stood up and knocked his pipe against the bench. He closed his book and sauntered off along the path, wiping his perspiring forehead with a vast red handkerchief.

“What happens to Nannies when they get old?” Bobby asked wonderingly. “What do they do? Where do they go?”

“They go to heaven.” Jean lovingly thumped the green dented hull with her hand. “Just like everybody else.”

“Are Nannies born? Were there always Nannies?” Bobby had begun to conjecture on ultimate cosmic mysteries. “Maybe there was a time before there were Nannies. I wonder what the world was like in the days before Nannies lived.”

“Of course there were always Nannies,” Jean said impatiently. “If there weren’t, where did they come from?”

Bobby couldn’t answer that. He meditated for a time, but presently he became sleepy … he was really too young to solve such problems. His eyelids became heavy and he yawned. Both he and Jean lay on the warm grass by the edge of the lake, watching the sky and the clouds, listening to the wind moving through the grove of cedar trees. Beside them the battered green Nanny rested and recuperated her meager strength.

A little girl came slowly across the field of grass, a pretty child in a blue dress with a bright ribbon in her long dark hair. She was coming toward the lake.

“Look,” Jean said. “There’s Phyllis Casworthy. She has an *orange* Nanny.”

They watched, interested. “Who ever heard of an orange Nanny?” Bobby said, disgusted. The girl and her Nanny crossed the path a short distance down, and reached the edge of the lake. She and her orange Nanny halted, gazing around at the water and the white sails of toy boats, the mechanical fish.

“Her Nanny is bigger than ours,” Jean observed.

“That’s true,” Bobby admitted. He thumped the green side loyally. “But ours is nicer. Isn’t she?”

Their Nanny did not move. Surprised, he turned to look. The green Nanny stood rigid, taut. Its better eye stalk was far out, staring at the orange Nanny fixedly, unwinkingly.

“What’s the matter?” Bobby asked uncomfortably.

“Nanny, what’s the matter?” Jean echoed.

The green Nanny whirred, as its gears meshed. Its treads dropped and locked into place with a sharp metallic snap. Slowly its doors retracted and its grapples slithered out.

“Nanny, what are you doing?” Jean scrambled nervously to her feet. Bobby leaped up, too. “Nanny! What’s going on?”

“Let’s go.” Jean said, frightened. “Let’s go home.”

“Come on, Nanny,” Bobby ordered. “We’re going home, now.”

The green Nanny moved away from them; it was totally unaware of their existence. Down the lakeside the other Nanny, the great orange Nanny, detached itself from the little girl and began to flow.

“Nanny, you come back!” the little girl’s voice came, shrill and apprehensive.

Jean and Bobby rushed up the sloping lawn, away from the lake. “She’ll come!” Bobby said. “Nanny! Please come!”

But the Nanny did not come.

The orange Nanny neared. It was huge, much more immense than the blue Mecho jaw-model that had come into the back yard that night. That

one now lay scattered in pieces on the far side of the fence, hull ripped open, its parts strewn everywhere.

This Nanny was the largest the green Nanny had ever seen. The green Nanny moved awkwardly to meet it, raising its grapples and preparing its internal shields. But the orange Nanny was unbending a square arm of metal, mounted on a long cable. The metal arm whipped out, rising high in the air. It began to whirl in a circle, gathering ominous velocity, faster and faster.

The green Nanny hesitated. It retreated, moving uncertainly away from the swinging mace of metal. And as it rested warily, unhappily, trying to make up its mind, the other leaped.

“Nanny!” Jean screamed.

“Nanny! Nanny!”

The two metal bodies rolled furiously in the grass, fighting and struggling desperately. Again and again the metal mace came, bashing wildly into the green side. The warm sun shone benignly down on them. The surface of the lake eddied gently in the wind.

“Nanny!” Bobby screamed, helplessly jumping up and down.

But there was no response from the frenzied, twisting mass of crashing orange and green.

“What are you going to do?” Mary Fields asked, tight-lipped and pale.

“You stay here.” Tom grabbed up his coat and threw it on; he yanked his hat down from the closet shelf and strode toward the front door.

“Where are you going?”

“Is the cruiser out front?” Tom pulled open the front door and made his way out onto the porch. The two children, miserable and trembling, watched him fearfully.

“Yes,” Mary murmured, “it’s out front. But where —”

Tom turned abruptly to the children. “You’re sure she’s — *dead*?”

Bobby nodded. His face was streaked with grimy tears. “Pieces… all over the lawn.”

Tom nodded grimly. “I’ll be right back. And don’t worry at all. You three stay here.”

He strode down the front steps, down the walk, to the parked cruiser. A moment later they heard him drive furiously away.

He had to go to several agencies before he found what he wanted. Service Industries had nothing he could use; he was through with them. It was at Allied Domestic that he saw exactly what he was looking for, displayed in their luxurious, well-lighted window. They were just closing, but the clerk let him inside when he saw the expression on his face.

“I’ll take it,” Tom said, reaching into his coat for his checkbook.

“Which one, sir?” the clerk faltered.

“The big one. The big black one in the window. With the four arms and the ram in front.”

The clerk beamed, his face aglow with pleasure. “Yes sir!” he cried, whipping out his order pad. “The Imperator Delux, with power-beam focus. Did you want the optional high-velocity grapple-lock and the remote-control feedback? At moderate cost, we can equip her with a visual report

screen; you can follow the situation from the comfort of your own living room."

"The situation?" Tom said thickly.

"As she goes into action." The clerk began writing rapidly. "And I mean *action* -- this model warms up and closes in on its adversary within fifteen seconds of the time its activated. You can't find faster reaction in any single-unit models, ours or anybody else's. Six months ago, they said fifteen second closing was a pipe dream. The clerk laughed excitedly. "But science strides on."

A strange cold numbness settled over Tom Fields. "Listen," he said hoarsely. Grabbing the clerk by the lapel he yanked him closer. The order pad fluttered away; the clerk gulped with surprise and fright. "Listen to me," Tom grated, "you're building these things bigger all the time — *aren't you?* Every year, new models, new weapons. You and all the other companies-building them with improved equipment to destroy each other."

"Oh," the clerk squeaked indignantly, "Allied Domestic's models are *never* destroyed. Banged up a little now and then, perhaps, but you show me one of our models that's been put out of commission." With dignity, he retrieved his order pad and smoothed down his coat. "No, sir," he said emphatically, "our models survive. Why, I saw a seven-year-old Allied running around, an old Model 3-S. Dented a bit, perhaps, but plenty of fire left. I'd like to see one of those cheap Protecto-Corp. models try to tangle with *that*."

Controlling himself with an effort, Tom asked: "But why? What's it all for? What's the purpose in this — competition between them?"

The clerk hesitated. Uncertainly, he began again with his order pad. "Yes sir," he said. "Competition; you put your finger right on it. Successful competition, to be exact. Allied Domestic doesn't meet competition — it *demolishes* it."

It took a second for Tom Fields to react. Then understanding came. “I see,” he said. “In other words, every year these things are obsolete. No good, not large enough. Not powerful enough. And if they’re not replaced, if I don’t get a new one, a more advanced model —”

“Your present Nanny was, ah, the loser?” The clerk smiled knowingly. “Your present model was, perhaps, slightly anachronistic? It failed to meet present-day standards of competition? It, ah, failed to come out at the end of the day?”

“It never came home,” Tom said thickly.

“Yes, it was demolished … I fully understand. Very common. You see, sir, you don’t have a choice. It’s nobody’s fault, sir. Don’t blame us; don’t blame Allied Domestic.”

“But,” Tom said harshly, “when one is destroyed, that means you sell another one. That means a sale for you. Money in the cash register.”

“True. But we all have to meet contemporary standards of excellence. We can’t let ourselves fall behind … as you saw, sir, if you don’t mind my saying so, you saw the unfortunate consequences of falling behind.”

“Yes,” Tom agreed, in an almost inaudible voice. “They told me not to have her repaired. They said I should replace her.”

The clerk’s confident, smugly-beaming face seemed to expand. Like a miniature sun, it glowed happily, exaltedly. “But now you’re all set up, sir. With this model you’re right up there in the front. Your worries are over, Mr… .” He halted expectantly. “Your name, sir? To whom shall I make out this purchase order?”

Bobby and Jean watched with fascination as the delivery men lugged the enormous crate into the living room. Grunting and sweating, they set it

down and straightened gratefully up.

“All right,” Tom said crisply. “Thanks.”

“Not at all, mister.” The delivery men stalked out, noisily closing the door after them.

“Daddy, what is it?” Jean whispered. The two children came cautiously around the crate, wide-eyed and awed.

“You’ll see in a minute.”

“Tom, it’s past their bedtime,” Mary protested. “Can’t they look at it tomorrow?”

“I want them to look at it *now*.” Tom disappeared downstairs into the basement and returned with a screwdriver. Kneeling on the floor beside the crate he began rapidly unscrewing the bolts that held it together. “They can go to bed a little late, for once.”

He removed the boards, one by one, working expertly and calmly. At last the final board was gone, propped up against the wall with the others. He unclipped the book of instructions and the 90-day warranty and handed them to Mary. “Hold onto these.”

“It’s a Nanny!” Bobby cried.

“It’s a huge, huge Nanny!”

In the crate the great black shape lay quietly, like an enormous metal tortoise, encased in a coating of grease. Carefully checked, oiled, and fully guaranteed. Tom nodded. “That’s right. It’s a Nanny, a new Nanny. To take the place of the old one.”

“For *us?*”

“Yes.” Tom sat down in a nearby chair and lit a cigarette. “Tomorrow morning we’ll turn her on and warm her up. See how she runs.”

The children’s eyes were like saucers. Neither of them could breathe or speak.

“But this time,” Mary said, “you must stay away from the park. Don’t take her near the park. You hear?”

“No,” Tom contradicted. “They can go in the park.”

Mary glanced uncertainly at him. “But that orange thing might —”

Tom smiled grimly. “It’s fine with me if they go into the park.” He leaned toward Bobby and Jean. “You kids go into the park any time you want. And don’t be afraid of anything. Of anything or anyone. Remember that.”

He kicked the end of the massive crate with his toe.

“There isn’t anything in the world you have to be afraid of. Not anymore.”

Bobby and Jean nodded, still gazing fixedly into the crate.

“All right, Daddy,” Jean breathed.

“Boy, look at her!” Bobby whispered. “Just look at her! I can hardly wait till tomorrow!”

Mrs. Andrew Casworthy greeted her husband on the front steps of their attractive three-story house, wringing her hands anxiously.

“What’s the matter?” Casworthy grunted, taking off his hat. With his pocket handkerchief he wiped sweat from his florid face. “Lord, it was hot today. What’s wrong? What is it?”

“Andrew, I’m afraid —”

“What the hell happened?”

“Phyllis came home from the park today without her Nanny. She was bent and scratched yesterday when Phyllis brought her home, and Phyllis is so upset I can’t make out —”

“Without her Nanny?”

“She came home alone. By herself. All alone.”

Slow rage suffused the man’s heavy features. “What happened?”

“Something in the park, like yesterday. Something attacked her Nanny. Destroyed her! I can’t get the story exactly straight, but something black, something huge and black … it must have been another Nanny.”

Casworthy’s jaw slowly jutted out. His thickset face turned ugly dark red, a deep unwholesome flush that rose ominously and settled in place. Abruptly, he turned on his heel.

“Where are you going?” his wife fluttered nervously.

The paunchy, red-faced man stalked rapidly down the walk toward his sleek surface cruiser, already reaching for the door handle.

“I’m going to shop for another Nanny,” he muttered. “The best damn Nanny I can get. Even if I have to go to a hundred stores. I want the best — and the biggest.”

“But, dear,” his wife began, hurrying apprehensively after him, “can we really afford it?” Wringing her hands together anxiously, she raced on: “I mean, wouldn’t it be better to wait? Until you’ve had time to think it over, perhaps. Maybe later on, when you’re a little more — calm.”

But Andrew Casworthy wasn’t listening. Already the surface cruiser boiled with quick, eager life, ready to leap forward. “Nobody’s going to get ahead of me,” he said grimly, his heavy lips twitching. “I’ll show them, all of them. Even if I have to get a new size designed. Even if I have to get one of those manufacturers to turn out a new model for me!”

And, oddly, he knew one of them would.

Notes

All notes in italics are by Philip K. Dick. The year when the note was written appears in parentheses following the note. Most of these notes were written as story notes for the collections THE BEST OF PHILIP K. DICK (published 1977) and THE GOLDEN MAN (published 1980). A few were written at the request of editors publishing or reprinting a PKD story in a book or magazine. The first entry below is from an introduction written for the collection THE PRESERVING MACHINE.

When there is a date following the name of a story, it is the date the manuscript of that story was first received by Dick's agent, per the records of the Scott Meredith Literary Agency. Absence of a date means no record is available. (Dick began working with the agency in mid-1952.) The name of a magazine followed by a month and year indicates the first published appearance of a story. An alternate name following a story indicates Dick's original name for the story, as shown in the agency records.

These five volumes include all of Philip K. Dick's short fiction, with the exception of short novels later published as or included in novels, childhood writings, and unpublished writings for which manuscripts have not been found. The stories are arranged as closely as possible in chronological order of composition; research for this chronology was done by Gregg Rickman and Paul Williams.

The difference between a short story and a novel comes to this: a short story may deal with murder; a novel deals with the murderer, and his actions stem from a psyche which, if the writer knows his craft, he has previously presented. The difference, therefore, between a novel and a short story is not length; for example, William Styron's The Long March *is now published as a "short novel" whereas originally in* Discovery *it was published as a "long story." This means that if you read it in* Discovery *you are reading a story, but if you pick up the paperback version you are reading a novel. So much for that.*

There is one restriction in a novel not found in short stories: the requirement that the protagonist be liked enough or familiar enough to the reader so that, whatever the protagonist does, the readers would also do, under the same circumstances… or, in the case of escapist fiction, would like to do. In a story it is not necessary to create such a reader identification character because (one) there is not enough room for such background material in a short story and (two) since the emphasis is on the deed, not the doer, it really does not matter — within reasonable limits, of course — who *in a story commits the murder. In a story, you learn about the characters from what they do; in a novel it is the other way around: you have your characters and then they do something idiosyncratic, emanating from their unique natures. So it can be said that events in a novel are unique — not found in other writings; but the same events occur over and over again in stories, until, at last, a sort of code language is built up between the reader and the author. I am not sure that this is bad by any means.*

Further, a novel — in particular the sf novel — creates an entire world, with countless petty details — petty, perhaps, to the characters in the novel, but vital for the reader to know, since out of these manifold details his comprehension of the entire fictional world is obtained. In a story, on the other hand, you are in a future world when soap operas come at you from every wall in the room… as Ray Bradbury once described. That one fact alone catapults the story out of mainstream fiction and into sf.

What an sf story really requires is the initial premise *which cuts it off entirely from our present world. This break must be made in the reading of, and the writing of,* all *good fiction… a made-up world must be presented. But there is much more pressure on an sf writer, for the break is far greater than in, say,* Paul's Case *or* Big Blonde *— two varieties of mainstream fiction which will always be with us.*

It is in sf stories that sf action occurs; it is in sf novels that worlds occur. The stories in this collection are a series of events. Crisis is the key to story-writing, a sort of brinkmanship in which the author mires his characters in happenings so sticky as to seem impossible of solution. And then he gets them out… usually. He can get them out; that's what matters. But in a novel

the actions are so deeply rooted in the personality of the main character that to extricate him the author would have to go back and rewrite his character. This need not happen in a story, especially a short one (such long, long stories as Thomas Mann's Death in Venice *are, like the Styron piece, really short novels). The implication of all this makes clear why some sf writers can write stories but not novels, or novels but not stories. It is because* anything *can happen in a story; the author merely tailors his character to the event. So, in terms of actions and events, the story is far less restrictive to the author than is a novel. As a writer builds up a novel-length piece it slowly begins to imprison him, to take away his freedom; his own characters are taking over and doing what they want to do — not what he would like them to do. This is on one hand the strength of the novel and on the other, its weakness.* (1968)

STABILITY written 1947 or earlier [previously unpublished].

ROOG written 11/51. *Fantasy & Science Fiction*, Feb 1953. [First sale.]

The first thing you do when you sell your first story is phone up your best friend and tell him. Whereupon he hangs up on you, which puzzles you until you realize that he is trying to sell stories, too, and hasn 't managed to do it. That sobers you, that reaction. But then when your wife comes home you tell her, and she doesn 't hang up on you; she is very pleased and excited. At the time I sold Roog *to Anthony Boucher at* Fantasy and Science Fiction *I was managing a record store part time and writing part time. If anyone asked me what I did I always said "I'm a writer." This was in Berkeley, in 1951. Everybody was a writer. No one had ever sold anything. In fact most of the people I knew believed it to be crass and undignified to submit a story to a magazine; you wrote it, read it aloud to your friends, and finally it was forgotten. That was Berkeley in those days.*

Another problem for me in getting everyone to be awed was that my story was not a literary story in a little magazine, but an sf story. Sf was not read by people in Berkeley in those days (except for a small group of fans who were very strange; they looked like animated vegetables). "But what about your serious *writing?" people said to me. I was under the impression that* Roog *was quite a serious story. It tells of fear; it tells of loyalty; it tells*

of obscure menace and a good creature who cannot convey knowledge of that menace to those he loves. What could be more serious a theme than this? What people really meant by "serious" was "important." Sf was, by definition, not important. I cringed over the weeks following my sale of Roog *as I realized the serious Codes of Behavior I had broken by selling my story, and an sf story at that.*

To make matters worse, I now had begun to nurse the delusion that I might be able to make a living as a writer. The fantasy in my head was that I could quit my job at the record store, buy a better typewriter, and write all the time, and still make the payments on my house. As soon as you start thinking that they come for you and haul you away. It's for your own good. When you are discharged later on as cured you no longer have that fantasy. You go back to work at the record store (or the supermarket or polishing shoes). See, the thing is, being a writer is — well, it's like the time I asked a friend of mine what field he was going into when he got out of college and he said, "I'm going to be a pirate." He was dead serious.

The fact that Roog *sold was due to Tony Boucher outlining to me how the original version should be changed. Without his help I'd still be in the record business. I mean that very seriously. At that time Tony ran a little writing class, working out of the living room of his home in Berkeley. He'd read our stories aloud and we'd see — not just that they were awful — but how they could be cured. Tony saw no point in simply making it clear that what you had written was no good; he assisted you in transmuting the thing into art. Tony knew what made up good writing. He charged you (get this) one dollar a week for this. One dollar! If ever there was a good man in this world it was Anthony Boucher. We really loved him. We used to get together once a week and play poker. Poker, opera and writing were all equally important to Tony. I miss him very much. Back in 19741 dreamed one night that I had passed across into the next world, and it was Tony who was waiting for me to show up there. Tears fill my eyes when I think of that dream. There he was, but transformed into Tony the Tiger, like in that breakfast cereal ad. In the dream he was filled with delight and so was I. But it was a dream; Tony Boucher is gone. But I am still a writer, because of him. Whenever I sit down to start a novel or a story a bit of the memory of*

that man returns to me. I guess he taught me to write out of love, not out of ambition. It's a good lesson for all activities in this world.

This little story, Roog, *is about an actual dog — like Tony, gone now. The dog's actual name was Snooper and he believed as much in his work as I did in mine. His work (apparently) was to see that no one stole the food from the owner's garbage can. Snooper was laboring under the delusion that his owners considered the garbage valuable. Every day they'd carry out paper sacks of delicious food and carefully deposit them in a strong metal container, placing the lid down firmly. At the end of the week the garbage can was full — whereupon the worst assortment of evil entities in the Sol System drove up in a huge truck and stole the food. Snooper knew which day of the week this happened on; it was always on Friday. So about five A.M. on Friday, Snooper would emit his first bark. My wife and I figured that was about the time the garbagemen's alarm clocks were going off. Snooper knew when they left their houses. He could hear them. He was the only one who knew; everybody else ignored what was afoot. Snooper must have thought he inhabited a planet of lunatics. His owners, and everyone else in Berkeley, could hear the garbagemen coming, but no one did anything. His barking drove me out of my mind every week, but I was more fascinated by Snooper's logic than I was annoyed by his frantic efforts to rouse us. I asked myself, What must the world look like to that dog? Obviously he doesn 't see as we see. He has developed a complete system of beliefs, a worldview totally different from ours, but logical given the evidence he is basing it on.*

So here, in a primitive form, is the basis of much of my twenty-seven years of professional writing: the attempt to get into another person's head, or another creature's head, and see out from his eyes or its eyes, and the more different that person is from the rest of us the better. You start with the sentient entity and work outward, inferring its world. Obviously, you can't ever really know *what its world is like, but, I think, you can make some pretty good guesses. I began to develop the idea that each creature lives in a world somewhat different from all the other creatures and their worlds. I still think this is true. To Snooper, garbagemen were sinister and horrible. I think he literally saw them differently than we humans did.*

This notion about each creature viewing the world differently from all other creatures — not everyone would agree with me. Tony Boucher was very anxious to have a particular major anthologizer (whom we will call J.M.) read Roog *to see if she might use it. Her reaction astounded me. "Garbagemen do not look like that,"she wrote me. "They do not have pencil-thin necks and heads that wobble. They do not eat people." I think she listed something like twelve errors in the story all having to do with how I represented the garbagemen. I wrote back, explaining that, yes, she was right, but to a dog — well, all right, the dog was wrong. Admittedly. The dog was a little crazy on the subject. We're not just dealing with a dog and a dog's view of garbagemen, but a crazy dog — who has been driven crazy by these weekly raids on the garbage can. The dog has reached a point of desperation. I wanted to convey that. In fact that was the whole point of the story; the dog had run out of options and was demented by this weekly event. And the Roogs knew it. They enjoyed it. They taunted the dog. They pandered to his lunacy.*

Ms. J.M. rejected the story from her anthology, but Tony printed it, and it's still in print; in fact it's in a high school text book, now. I spoke to a high school class who had been assigned the story, and all of the kids understood it. Interestingly, it was a blind student who seemed to grasp the story best. He knew from the beginning what the word Roog *meant. He felt the dog's despair, the dog's frustrated fury and the bitter sense of defeat over and over again. Maybe somewhere between 1951 and 1971 we all grew up to dangers and transformations of the ordinary which we had never recognized before. I don't know. But anyhow,* Roog, *my first sale, is biographical; I watched the dog suffer, and I understood a little (not much, maybe, but a little) of what was destroying him, and I wanted to speak for him. That's the whole of it right there. Snooper couldn't talk. I could. In fact I could write it down, and someone could publish it and many people could read it. Writing fiction has to do with this: becoming the voice for those without voices, if you see what I mean. It's not your own voice, you the author; it is all those other voices which normally go unheard.*

The dog Snooper is dead, but the dog in the story, Boris, is alive. Tony Boucher is dead, as some day I will be, and, alas, so will you. But when I was with that high school class and we were discussing Roog, *in 1971, exactly twenty years after I sold the story originally — Snooper's barking*

and his anguish, his noble efforts, were still alive, which he deserved. My story is my gift to an animal, to a creature who neither sees nor hears, now, who no longer barks. But goddam it, he was doing the right thing. Even if Ms. J.M. didn't understand. (written 1978)

I love this story, and I doubt if I write any better today than I did in 1951, when I wrote it; I just write longer. (1976)

THE LITTLE MOVEMENT *Fantasy & Science Fiction*, Nov 1952.

BEYOND LIES THE WUB *Planet Stories*, July 1952.

My first published story, in the most lurid of all pulp magazines on the stands at the time, Planet Stories. *As I carried four copies into the record store where I worked, a customer gazed at me and them, with dismay, and said, "Phil, you read that kind of stuff?" I had to admit I not only read it, I wrote it.*

THE GUN *Planet Stories,* Sept 1952.

THE SKULL *If*, Sept 1952.

THE DEFENDERS *Galaxy,* Jan 1953. [Parts of this story were adapted for the novel THE PENULTIMATE TRUTH.]

MR. SPACESHIP *Imagination*, Jan 1953.

PIPER IN THE WOODS *Imagination,* Feb 1953.

THE INFINITES *Planet Stones,* May 1953.

THE PRESERVING MACHINE *Fantasy & Science Fiction*, June 1953.

EXPENDABLE ("He Who Waits") *Fantasy & Science Fiction,* July 1953.

I loved to write short fantasy stories in my early days — for Anthony Boucher — of which this is my favorite. I got the idea when a fly buzzed by my head one day and I imagined (paranoia indeed!) that it was laughing at me. (1976)

THE VARIABLE MAN *Space Science Fiction* (British), July 1953.

THE INDEFATIGABLE *FROG Fantastic Story Magazine*, July 1953.

THE CRYSTAL CRYPT *Planet Stories,* Jan 1954.

THE SHORT HAPPY LIFE OF THE BROWN OXFORD *Fantasy & Science Fiction,* Jan 1954.

THE BUILDER *7/23/52. Amazing,* Dec 1953-Jan 1954.

MEDDLER 7/24/52. *Future,* Oct 1954.

Within the beautiful lurks the ugly; you can see in this rather crude story the germ of my whole theme that nothing is what it seems. This story should be read as a trial run on my part; I was just beginning to grasp that obvious form and latent form are not the same thing. As Heraclitus said in fragment 54: "Latent structure is master of obvious structure," and out of this comes the later more sophisticated Platonic dualism between the phenomenal world and the real but invisible realm of forms lying behind it. I may be reading too much into this simple-minded early story, but at least I was beginning to see in a dim way what I later saw so clearly; in fragment 123, Heraclitus said, "The nature of things is in the habit of concealing itself," and therein lies it all. (1978)

PAYCHECK 7/31/52. *Imagination, June* 1953.

How much is a key to a bus locker worth? One day it's worth 25 cents, the next day thousands of dollars. In this story, I got to thinking that there are times in our lives when having a dime to make a phone call spells the difference between life and death. Keys, small change, maybe a theater ticket — how about a parking receipt for a Jaguar? All I had to do was link

this idea up with time travel to see how the small and useless, under the wise eyes of a time traveler, might signify a great deal more. He would know when that dime might save your life. And, back in the past again, he might prefer that dime to any amount of money, no matter how large. (1976)

THE GREAT C 7/31/52. *Cosmos Science Fiction and Fantasy,* Sept 1953. [Parts of this story were adapted for the novel DEUS IRAE.]

OUT IN THE GARDEN 7/31/52. *Fantasy Fiction,* Aug 1953.

THE KING OF THE ELVES ("Shadrach Jones and the Elves") 8/4/52. *Beyond Fantasy Fiction,* Sept 1953.

This story, of course, is fantasy, not sf. Originally it had a downbeat ending on it, but Horace Gold, the editor who bought it, carefully explained to me that prophecy always came true; if it didn't ipso facto it wasn't prophecy. I guess, then, there can be no such thing as a false prophet; "false prophet" is an oxymoron. (1978)

COLONY 8/11/52. *Galaxy, June* 1953.

The ultimate in paranoia is not when everyone is against you but when everything is against you. Instead of "My boss is plotting against me," it would be "My boss's phone is plotting against me." Objects sometimes seem to possess a will of their own anyhow, to the normal mind; they don't do what they're supposed to do, they get in the way, they show an unnatural resistance to change. In this story I tried to figure out a situation which would rationally explain the dire plotting of objects against humans, without reference to any deranged state on the part of the humans. I guess you'd have to go to another planet. The ending on this story is the ultimate victory of a plotting object over innocent people. (1976)

PRIZE SHIP ("Globe From Ganymede") 8/14/52. *Thrilling Wonder Stories,* Winter 1954.

NANNY 8/26/52. *Startling Stories,* Spring 1955.

The Collected Stories of Philip K. Dick Vol.2

Philip K. Dick

The Collected Stories of Philip K. Dick Vol. 2

by Philip K. Dick

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Introduction

By Norman Spinrad

Philip K. Dick's debut story, *Beyond Lies the Wub*, was first published in 1952. This volume, *SECOND VARIETY,* contains 27 short stories published between 1952 and 1955, when his first novel, *SOLAR LOTTERY,* appeared. What is more, it does not include every story he published during the first four years of his career either.

That in itself is quite remarkable. Few writers could boast such prodigious publication in the first four years of their careers, even in this period, when markets for short sf were relatively abundant and editors had many slots to fill. And while it must be admitted that there are a certain number of fairly trivial gimmick stories in this book, the majority of them already show many of the unique virtues of Dick's more mature work, and even the least of them are written in his unmistakable voice.

Considering that they were written in such a brief period by a new writer in the first flush of his career, that Dick must have been churning them out rapidly to make money and a name, these 27 stories are also quite remarkable for what they are not.

There is not really an action-adventure formula story in here. No space opera. No nuts and bolts. No fully-developed alien civilizations. No intrepid stock heroes, villains, mad scientists, no real good guys versus bad guys at all. From the very outset, Dick wrote as if the commercial conventions of the sf genre did not exist. Even the one-punch gimmick stories are *Dickian* gimmicks. From the beginning, Dick was reinventing science fiction, turning it into a literary instrument for his own concerns, and yes, obsessions.

What we have here is a kind of fascinating time capsule, 27 stories published before Philip K. Dick's first novel, the compressed short fiction apprenticeship of a writer who was to go on to become one of the great novelists of the twentieth century and arguably the greatest metaphysical novelist of all time.

Dick began writing during what at least in a publishing sense was the greatest transformation that science fiction has ever seen. In the early 1950s, the magazines were still the dominant mode of sf publication, meaning that short fiction was still the dominant form. By the time he published *SOLAR LOTTERY* in 1955, the paperback book was on its way to becoming the dominant publishing mode, and the novel therefore the dominant form.

In the 1950s, with the standard advance for an sf novel being about $1500, any writer trying to eke out a precarious living writing sf was still constrained to crank out short stories for the magazines. And what with novel slots still being limited, one was also constrained to make one's mark as a short story writer before a publisher was about to grant a novel contract at all.

Nor, in hindsight, as evidenced by this volume, was this, in literary terms at least, a bad thing, even for a writer like Dick, whose natural metier was the novel. These 27 stories, and the others published before *SOLAR LOTTERY,* were an apprenticeship in the best sense of the term.

Reading these stories one after the other in a single volume, one is indeed struck by a certain sameness, a certain repetitiveness, a certain series of recurrences, a sense of a writer staking out the territory of his future oeuvre. We would see the same thing in the short fiction of other writers of the period, and even much later, in the early short fiction, for example, of John Varley, William Gibson, Lucius Shepard, Kim Stanley Robinson.

But in this book, what we see is a uniquely Dickian sameness.

Most sf writers who stake out a territory in their early short fiction that they will later explore at greater length and depth tend to create a consistent universe like Larry Niven's "Known Space" or recurring characters like Keith Laumer's Retief or a historical template like Robert A. Heinlein's "Future History," and not infrequently all three.

In part this is a commercial strategy. A new writer naive or crazy enough to actually attempt a career as a full-time sf short story writer has to write a lot of fiction rather rapidly to stay afloat. It is much easier to reuse settings, history, and characters than to begin from zero each time out, and, as network TV has long proven, the episodic series is the fastest way to build an audience too.

That, however, is not what Philip K. Dick did. There are no real recurring characters in these stories. There is no attempt to set them all in a consistent universe. Except for some rather tenuous connections between *Second Variety*, *Jon's World*, and *James P. Crow*, there is really no attempt at a consistent future history either.

But there most certainly *are* recurrences of theme, imagery, and metaphysical concerns, and we will see them again and again in Dick's subsequent novels, expanded upon, recomplicated, deepened, made quite vast.

The Earth reduced to a nuclear ash heap. Robot weapons systems evolving towards baleful anti-empathetic pseudo-life. Human freedom ground down in the name of military security, economic prosperity, or even order for its own sake. Interpenetrating realities. Ironic time-loops and paradoxes. Ordinary people holding ordinary jobs as the heroes and heroines trying to muddle through.

These stories were written during the fever pitch of the Cold War, the height of the anti-Communist hysteria engendered by Senator Joseph McCarthy and the House Un-American Activities Committee, the nadir of the nuclear war paranoia, when school children were taught to hide under their desks when the air raid sirens went off. And on an obvious level they

reflect this quite overtly. They show that Dick was a writer of deep political concern from the very outset.

But they show something much more. At a time when there was no little danger in voicing such views, Dick spoke out loud and clear *against* the prevailing hysterias of the times — against militarism, security obsession, xenophobia, and chauvinism.

Further, what these stories juxtapose against these large scale political evils are not equally large scale political virtues but the intimate small scale human and spiritual virtues of modest heroism, caritas, and most of all the empathy that, in the end, is finally what distinguishes the human from the machine, the spiritual from the mechanical, authentic being from even the most cunningly crafted pseudo-life.

And if we already see here what was to be the great theme and the spiritual core of Philip K. Dick's whole career, so too do we see in these stories the genesis of the characteristic literary technique which so cogently brings it down to an intimate and specific human level — Dick's use of multiple viewpoint characters.

True, his use of multiple viewpoint techniques is not always perfect in these early stories. Sometimes he cavalierly shifts viewpoint within a scene for mere narrative convenience. Sometimes he introduces a new viewpoint character in media res just to give us a scene he cannot easily render from viewpoints he has already established. Sometimes a viewpoint character appears for only a few paragraphs and then disappears.

Dick is learning multiple viewpoint technique in these stories. Indeed, it may be more accurate to say that he is *inventing* it, for few if any writers had really used multiple viewpoint this way before Dick, and all of us who were to adopt it later owe a great debt to him, whether we consciously realize it or not.

For what the Dickian multiple viewpoint technique allows the writer to do is to tell the story from within the consciousness, the spirit, the heart, of

several characters, not merely one. It allows intimacy, it grants the reader empathy, with the *multiplexity* of the human spirit within the confines of a single tale. And in the hands of a master like Philip K. Dick, it becomes a series of windows into the metaphysical multiplexity of reality itself, the perfect merger of theme and form.

These 27 stories are not perfect. It would be a disservice to the truth and to Philip K. Dick's literary reputation to contend that they represent the full flowering of the mature talent to come. But they too are a series of windows, windows into the past, into the beginnings of a great spirit's long and mighty journey, and windows too into the future, into the fully developed vision of the mature master the talented young apprentice who wrote them was one day destined to become.

Norman Spinrad

October, 1986

Paranoia, in some respects, I think, is a modern-day development of an ancient, archaic sense that animals still have — quarry-type animals — that they're being watched… I say paranoia is an atavistic sense. It's a lingering sense, that we had long ago, when we were — our ancestors were — very vulnerable to predators, and this sense tells them they're being watched. And they're being watched probably by something that's going to get them…

And often my characters have this feeling.

But what really I've done is, I have atavized their society. That although it's set in the future, in many ways they're living — there is a retrogressive quality in their lives, you know? They're living like our ancestors did. I mean, the hardware is in the future, the scenery's in the future, but the situations are really from the past.

— Philip K. Dick in an interview, 1974

The Cookie Lady

“Where you going, Bubber?” Ernie Mill shouted from across the street, fixing papers for his route.

“No place,” Bubber Surle said.

“You going to see your lady friend?” Ernie laughed and laughed. “What do you go visit that old lady for? Let us in on it!”

Bubber went on. He turned the corner and went down Elm Street. Already, he could see the house, at the end of the street, set back a little on the lot. The front of the house was overgrown with weeds, old dry weeds that rustled and chattered in the wind. The house itself was a little gray box, shabby and unpainted, the porch steps sagging. There was an old weather-beaten rocking chair on the porch with a torn piece of cloth hanging over it.

Bubber went up the walk. As he started up the rickety steps he took a deep breath. He could smell it, the wonderful warm smell, and his mouth began to water. His heart thudding with anticipation, Bubber turned the handle of the bell. The bell grated rustily on the other side of the door. There was silence for a time, then the sounds of someone stirring.

Mrs Drew opened the door. She was old, very old, a little dried-up old lady, like the weeds that grew along the front of the house. She smiled down at Bubber, holding the door wide for him to come in.

“You’re just in time,” she said. “Come on inside, Bernard. You’re just in time — they’re just now ready.”

Bubber went to the kitchen door and looked in. He could see them, resting on a big blue plate on top of the stove. Cookies, a plate of warm, fresh cookies right out of the oven. Cookies with nuts and raisins in them.

“How do they look?” Mrs Drew said. She rustled past him, into the kitchen. “And maybe some cold milk, too. You like cold milk with them.” She got the milk pitcher from the window box on the back porch. Then she poured a glass of milk for him and set some of the cookies on a small plate. “Let’s go into the living room,” she said.

Bubber nodded. Mrs Drew carried the milk and the cookies in and set them on the arm of the couch. Then she sat down in her own chair, watching Bubber plop himself down by the plate and begin to help himself.

Bubber ate greedily, as usual, intent on the cookies, silent except for chewing sounds. Mrs Drew waited patiently, until the boy had finished, and his already ample sides bulged that much more. When Bubber was done with the plate he glanced toward the kitchen again, at the rest of the cookies on the stove.

“Wouldn’t you like to wait until later for the rest?” Mrs Drew said.

“All right,” Bubber agreed.

“How were they?”

“Fine.”

“That’s good.” She leaned back in her chair. “Well, what did you do in school today? How did it go?”

“All right.”

The little old lady watched the boy look restlessly around the room. “Bernard,” she said presently, “won’t you stay and talk to me for a while?” He had some books on his lap, some school books. “Why don’t you read to me from your books? You know, I don’t see too well any more and it’s a comfort to me to be read to.”

“Can I have the rest of the cookies after?”

“Of course.”

Bubber moved over towards her, to the end of the couch. He opened his books, World Geography, Principles of Arithmetic, Hoyte’s Speller. “Which do you want?”

She hesitated. “The geography.”

Bubber opened the big blue book at random. PERU. “Peru is bounded on the north by Ecuador and Columbia, on the south by Chile, and on the east by Brazil and Bolivia. Peru is divided into three main sections. These are, first —”

The little old lady watched him read, his fat cheeks wobbling as he read, holding his finger next to the line. She was silent, watching him, studying the boy intently as he read, drinking in each frown of concentration, every motion of his arms and hands. She relaxed, letting herself sink back in her chair. He was very close to her, only a little way off. There was only the table and lamp between them. How nice it was to have him come; he had been coming for over a month, now, ever since the day she had been sitting on her porch and seen him go by and thought to call to him, pointing to the cookies by her rocker.

Why had she done it? She did not know. She had been alone so long that she found herself saying strange things and doing strange things. She saw so few people, only when she went down to the store or the mailman came with her pension check. Or the garbage men.

The boy’s voice droned on. She was comfortable, peaceful and relaxed. The little old lady closed her eyes and folded her hands in her lap. And as she sat, dozing and listening, something began to happen. The little old lady was beginning to change, her gray wrinkles and lines dimming away. As she sat in the chair she was growing younger, the thin fragile body filling

out with youth again. The gray hair thickened and darkened, color coming to the wispy strands. Her arms filled, too, the mottled flesh turning a rich hue as it had been once, many years before.

Mrs Drew breathed deeply, not opening her eyes. She could feel *something* happening, but she did not know just what. *Something* was going on; she could feel it, and it was good. But what it was she did not exactly know. It had happened before, almost every time the boy came and sat by her. Especially of late, since she had moved her chair nearer to the couch. She took a deep breath. How good it felt, the warm fullness, a breath of warmth inside her cold body for the first time in years!

In her chair the little old lady had become a dark-haired matron of perhaps thirty, a woman with full cheeks and plump arms and legs. Her lips were red again, her neck even a little too fleshy, as it had been once in the long forgotten past.

Suddenly the reading stopped. Bubber put down his book and stood up. “I have to go,” he said. “Can I take the rest of the cookies with me?”

She blinked, rousing herself. The boy was in the kitchen, filling his pockets with cookies. She nodded, dazed, still under the spell. The boy took the last cookies. He went across the living room to the door. Mrs Drew stood up. All at once the warmth left her. She felt tired, tired and very dry. She caught her breath, breathing quickly. She looked down at her hands. Wrinkled, thin.

“Oh!” she murmured. Tears blurred her eyes. It was gone, gone again as soon as he moved away. She tottered to the mirror above the mantel and looked at herself. Old faded eyes stared back, eyes deep-set in a withered face. Gone, all gone, as soon as the boy had left her side.

“I’ll see you later,” Bubber said.

“Please,” she whispered. “Please come back again. Will you come back?”

“Sure,” Bubber said listlessly. He pushed the door open. “Goodbye.” He went down the steps. In a moment she heard his shoes against the sidewalk. He was gone.

“Bubber, you come in here!” May Surle stood angrily on the porch. “You get in here and sit down at the table.”

“All right.” Bubber came slowly up on to the porch, pushing inside the house.

“What’s the matter with you?” She caught his arm. “Where you been? Are you sick?”

“I’m tired.” Bubber rubbed his forehead.

His father came through the living room with the newspapers, in his undershirt. “What’s the matter?” he said.

“Look at him,” May Surle said. “All worn out. What you been doing, Bubber?”

“He’s been visiting that old lady,” Ralf Surle said. “Can’t you tell? He’s always washed out after he’s been visiting her. What do you go there for, Bub? What goes on?”

“She gives him cookies,” May said. “You know how he is about things to eat. He’d do anything for a plate of cookies.”

“Bub,” his father said, “listen to me. I don’t want you hanging around that crazy old lady anymore. Do you hear me? I don’t care how many cookies she gives you. You come home too tired! No more of that. You hear me?”

Bubber looked down at the floor, leaning against the door. His heart beat heavily, labored. “I told her I’d come back,” he muttered.

“You can go once more,” May said, going into the dining room, “but only once more. Tell her you won’t be able to come back again, though. You make sure you tell her nice. Now go upstairs and get washed up.”

“After dinner better have him lie down,” Ralf said, looking up the stairs, watching Bubber climb slowly, his hand on the banister. He shook his head. “I don’t like it,” he murmured. “I don’t want him going there any more. There’s something strange about that old lady.”

“Well, it’ll be the last tine,” May said.

Wednesday was warm and sunny. Bubber strode along, his hands in his pockets. He stopped in front of McVane’s drugstore for a minute, looking speculatively at the comic books. At the soda fountain a woman was drinking a big chocolate soda. The sight of it made Bubber’s mouth water. That settled it. He turned and continued on his way, even increasing his pace a little.

A few minutes later he came up on the the gray sagging porch and rang the bell. Below him the weeds blew and rustled with the wind. It was almost four o’clock; he could not stay too long: But then, it was the last time anyhow.

The door opened. Mrs Drew’s wrinkled face broke into smiles. “Come in, Bernard. It’s good to see you standing there. It makes me feel so young again to have you come visit.”

He went inside, looking around.

“I’ll start the cookies. I didn’t know if you were coming.” She padded into the kitchen. “I’ll get them started right away. You sit down on the couch.”

Bubber went over and sat down. He noticed that the table and lamp were gone; the chair was right up next to the couch. He was looking at the chair in perplexity when Mrs Drew came rustling back into the room.

“They’re in the oven. I had the batter all ready. Now.” She sat down in the chair with a sigh. “Well, how did it go today? How was school?”

“Fine.”

She nodded. How plump he was, the little boy, sitting just a little distance from her, his cheeks red and full! She could touch him, he was so close. Her aged heart thumped. Ah, to be young again. Youth was so much. It was everything. What did the world mean to the old? *When all the world is old, lad…*

“Do you want to read to me, Bernard?” she asked presently.

“I didn’t bring any books.”

“Oh.” She nodded. “Well, I have some books,” she said quickly. “I’ll get them.”

She got up, crossing to the bookcase. As she opened the doors, Bubber said, “Mrs Drew, my father says I can’t come here anymore. He says this is the last time. I thought I’d tell you.”

She stopped, standing rigid. Everything seemed to leap around her, the room twisting furiously. She took a harsh, frightened breath. “Bernard, you’re — you’re not coming back?”

“No, my father says not to.”

There was silence. The old lady took a book at random and came slowly back to her chair. After a while she passed the book to him, her hands trembling. The boy took it without expression, looking at its cover.

“Please, read, Bernard. Please.”

“All right.” He opened the book. “Where’ll I start?”

“Anywhere. Anywhere, Bernard.”

He began to read. It was something by Trollope; she only half heard the words. She put her hand to her forehead, the dry skin, brittle and thin, like old paper. She trembled with anguish. The last time?

Bubber read on, slowly, monotonously. Against the window a fly buzzed. Outside the sun began to set, the air turning cool. A few clouds came up, and the wind in the trees rushed furiously.

The old lady sat, close by the boy, closer than ever, hearing him read, the sound of his voice, sensing him close by. Was this really the last time? Terror rose up in her heart and she pushed it back. The last time! She gazed at him, the boy sitting so close to her. After a time she reached out her thin, dry hand. She took a deep breath. He would never be back. There would be no more times, no more. This was the last time he would sit there.

She touched his arm.

Bubber looked up. “What is it?” he murmured.

“You don’t mind if I touch your arm, do you?”

“No, I guess not.” He went on reading. The old lady could feel the youngness of him, flowing between her fingers, through her arm. A pulsating vibrating youngness, so close to her. It had never been that close, where she could actually touch it. The feel of life made her dizzy, unsteady.

And presently it began to happen, as before. She closed her eyes, letting it move over her, filling her up, carried into her by the sound of the voice and the feel of the arm. The change, the flow, was coming over her, the warm, rising feeling. She was blooming again, filling with life, swelling into richness, as she had been, once, long ago.

She looked down at her arms. Rounded, they were, and the nails clear. Her hair. Black again, heavy and black against her neck. She touched her cheek. The wrinkles had gone, the skin pliant and soft.

Joy filled her, a growing bursting joy. She stared around her, at the room. She smiled, feeling her firm teeth and gums, red lips, strong white teeth. Suddenly she got to her feet, her body secure and confident. She turned a little, lithe, quick circle.

Bubber stopped reading. “Are the cookies ready?” he said.

“I’ll see.” Her voice was alive, deep with a quality that had dried out many years before. Now it was there again, *her* voice, throaty and sensual. She walked quickly to the kitchen and opened the oven. She took out the cookies and put them on top of the stove.

“All ready,” she called gaily. “Come and get them.”

Bubber came past her, his gaze fastened on the sight of the cookies. He did not even notice the woman by the door.

Mrs Drew hurried from the kitchen. She went into the bedroom, closing the door after her. Then she turned, gazing into the full-length mirror on the door. Young — she was young again, filled out with the sap of vigorous youth. She took a deep breath, her steady bosom swelling. Her eyes flashed, and she smiled. She spun, her skirts flying. Young and lovely. And this time it had not gone away.

She opened the door. Bubber had filled his mouth and his pockets. He was standing in the center of the living room, his face fat and dull, a dead white.

“What’s the matter?” Mrs Drew said.

“I’m going.”

“All right, Bernard. And thanks for coming to read to me.” She laid her hand on his shoulder. “Perhaps I’ll see you again some time.”

“My father —”

“I know.” She laughed gaily, opening the door for him. “Goodbye, Bernard. Goodbye.”

She watched him go slowly down the steps, one at a time. Then she closed the door and skipped back into the bedroom. She unfastened her dress and stepped out of it, the worn gray fabric suddenly distasteful to her. For a brief second she gazed at her full, rounded body, her hands on her hips.

She laughed with excitement, turning a little, her eyes bright. What a wonderful body, bursting with life. A swelling breast — she touched herself. The flesh was firm. There was so much, so many things to do! She gazed about her, breathing quickly. So many things! She started the water running in the bathtub and then went to tie her hair up.

The wind blew around him as he trudged home. It was late, the sun had set and the sky overhead was dark and cloudy. The wind that blew and nudged against him was cold, and it penetrated through his clothing, chilling him. The boy felt tired, his head ached, and he stopped every few minutes, rubbing his forehead and resting, his heart laboring. He left Elm Street and went up Pine Street. The wind screeched around him, pushing him from side to side. He shook his head, trying to clear it. How weary he

was, how tired his arms and legs were. He felt the wind hammering at him, pushing and plucking at him.

He took a breath and went on, his head down. At the corner he stopped, holding on to a lamp-post. The sky was quite dark, the street lights were beginning to come on. At last he went on, walking as best he could.

"Where is that boy?" May Surle said, going out on the porch for the tenth time. Ralf flicked on the light and they stood together. "What an awful wind."

The wind whistled and lashed at the porch. The two of them looked up and down the dark street, but they could see nothing but a few newspapers and trash being blown along.

"Let's go inside," Ralf said. "He sure is going to get a licking when he gets home."

They sat down at the dinner table. Presently May put down her fork. "Listen! Do you hear something?"

Ralf listened.

Outside, against the front door, there was a faint sound, a tapping sound. He stood up. The wind howled outside, blowing the shades in the room upstairs. "I'll go see what it is," he said.

He went to the door and opened it. Something gray, something gray and dry was blowing up against the porch, carried by the wind. He stared at it, but he could not make it out. A bundle of weeds, weeds and rags blown by the wind, perhaps.

The bundle bounced against his legs. He watched it drift past him, against the wall of the house. Then he closed the door again slowly.

“What was it?” May called.

“Just the wind,” Ralf Surle said.

Beyond the Door

That night at the dinner table he brought it out and set it down beside her plate. Doris stared at it, her hand to her mouth. “My God, what is it?” She looked up at him, bright-eyed.

“Well, open it.”

Doris tore the ribbon and paper from the square package with her sharp nails, her bosom rising and falling. Larry stood watching her as she lifted the lid. He lit a cigarette and leaned against the wall.

“A cuckoo clock!” Doris cried. “A real old cuckoo clock like my mother had.” She turned the clock over and over. “Just like my mother had, when Pete was still alive.” Her eyes sparkled with tears.

“It’s made in Germany,” Larry said. After a moment he added, “Carl got it for me wholesale. He knows some guy in the clock business. Otherwise I wouldn’t have —” he stopped.

Doris made a funny little sound.

“I mean, otherwise, I wouldn’t have been able to afford it.” He scowled. “What’s the matter with you? You’ve got your clock, haven’t you? Isn’t that what you want?”

Doris sat holding onto the clock, her fingers pressed against the brown wood.

“Well,” Larry said, “what’s the matter?”

He watched in amazement as she leaped up and ran from the room, still clutching the clock. He shook his head. “Never satisfied. They’re all that

way. Never get enough.”

He sat down at the table and finished his meal.

The cuckoo clock was not very large. It was handmade, however, and there were countless frets on it, little indentations and ornaments scored in the soft wood. Doris sat on the bed drying her eyes and winding the clock. She set the hands by her wristwatch. Presently she carefully moved the hands to two minutes of ten. She carried the clock over to the dresser and propped it up.

Then she sat waiting, her hands twisted together in her lap — waiting for the cuckoo to come out, for the hour to strike.

As she sat she thought about Larry and what he had said. And what she had said, too, for that matter — not that she could be blamed for any of it. After all, she couldn’t keep listening to him forever without defending herself; you had to blow your own trumpet in the world.

She touched her handkerchief to her eyes suddenly. Why did he have to say that, about getting it wholesale? Why did he have to spoil it all? If he felt that way he needn’t have got it in the first place. She clenched her fists. He was so mean, so damn mean.

But she was glad of the little clock sitting there ticking to itself, with its funny grilled edges and the door. Inside the door was the cuckoo, waiting to come out. Was he listening, his head cocked on one side, listening to hear the clock strike so that he would know to come out?

Did he sleep between hours? Well, she would soon see him: she could ask him. And she would show the clock to Bob. He would love it; Bob loved old things, even old stamps and buttons. Of course, it was a little *awkward,* but Larry had been staying at the office so much, and that helped. If only Larry didn’t call up sometimes to —

There was a whirr. The clock shuddered and all at once the door opened. The cuckoo came out, sliding swiftly. He paused and looked around solemnly, scrutinizing her, the room, the furniture.

It was the first time he had seen her, she realized, smiling to herself in pleasure. She stood up, coming toward him shyly. “Go on,” she said, “I’m waiting.”

The cuckoo opened his bill. He whirred and chirped, quickly, rhythmically. Then, after a moment of contemplation, he retired. And the door snapped shut.

She was delighted. She clapped her hands and spun in a little circle. He was marvelous, perfect! And the way he had looked around, studying her, sizing her up. He liked her; she was certain of it. And she, of course, loved him at once, completely. He was just what she had hoped would come out of the little door.

Doris went to the clock. She bent over the little door, her lips close to the wood. “Do you hear me?” she whispered. “I think you’re the most wonderful cuckoo in the world.” She paused, embarrassed. “I hope you’ll like it here.”

Then she went downstairs again, slowly, her head high.

Larry and the cuckoo clock really never got along well from the start. Doris said it was because he didn’t wind it right, and it didn’t like being only half-wound all the time. Larry turned the job of winding over to her; the cuckoo came out every quarter hour and ran the spring down without remorse, and someone had to be ever after it, winding it up again.

Doris did her best, but she forgot a good deal of the time. Then Larry would throw his newspaper down with an elaborate weary motion and stand up. He would go into the dining-room where the clock was mounted on the wall over the fireplace. He would take the clock down and making sure that he had his thumb over the little door, he would wind it up.

“Why do you put your thumb over the door?” Doris asked once.

“You’re supposed to.”

She raised an eyebrow. “Are you sure? I wonder if it isn’t that you don’t want him to come out while you’re standing so close.”

“Why not?”

“Maybe you’re afraid of him.”

Larry laughed. He put the clock back on the wall and gingerly removed his thumb. When Doris wasn’t looking he examined his thumb.

There was still a trace of the nick cut out of the soft part of it. Who — or what — had pecked at him?

One Saturday morning, when Larry was down at the office working over some important special accounts, Bob Chambers came to the front porch and rang the bell. Doris was taking a quick shower. She dried herself and slipped into her robe. When she opened the door Bob stepped inside, grinning.

“Hi,” he said, looking around.

“It’s all right. Larry’s at the office.”

“Fine.” Bob gazed at her slim legs below the hem of the robe. “How nice you look today.”

She laughed. “Be careful! Maybe I shouldn’t let you in after all.”

They looked at one another, half amused, half frightened. Presently Bob said, “If you want, I’ll —”

“No, for God’s sake.” She caught hold of his sleeve. “Just get out of the doorway so I can close it. Mrs Peters across the street, you know.”

She closed the door. “And I want to show you something,” she said. “You haven’t seen it.”

He was interested. “An antique? Or what?”

She took his arm, leading him toward the dining-room. “You’ll love it, Bobby.” She stopped wide-eyed. “I hope you will. You must; you must love it. It means so much to me — *he* means so much.”

“He?” Bob frowned. “Who is he?”

Doris laughed. “You’re jealous! Come on.” A moment later they stood before the clock, looking up at it. “He’ll come out in a few minutes. Wait until you see him. I know you two will get along fine.”

“What does Larry think of him?”

“They don’t like each other. Sometimes when Larry’s here he won’t come out. Larry gets mad if he doesn’t come out on time. He says —”

“Says what?”

Doris looked down. “He always says he’s been robbed, even if he did get it wholesale.” She brightened. “But I know he won’t come out because he doesn’t like Larry. When I’m here alone he comes right out for me, every fifteen minutes, even though he really only has to come out on the hour.”

She gazed up at the clock. “He comes out for me because he wants to. We talk; I tell him things. Of course, I’d like to have him upstairs in my

room, but it wouldn’t be right.”

There was a sound of footsteps on the front porch. They looked at each other, horrified.

Larry pushed the front door open, grunting. He set his briefcase down and took off his hat. Then he saw Bob for the first time.

“Chambers. I’ll be damned.” His eyes narrowed. “What are you doing here?” He came into the dining-room. Doris drew her robe about her helplessly, backing away.

“I —” Bob began. “That is, we —” He broke off, glancing at Doris. Suddenly the clock began to whirr. The cuckoo came rushing out, bursting into sound. Larry moved toward him.

“Shut that din off,” he said. He raised his fist toward the clock. The cuckoo snapped into silence and retreated. The door closed. “That’s better.” Larry studied Doris and Bob, standing mutely together.

“I came over to look at the clock,” Bob said. “Doris told me that it’s a rare antique and that —”

“Nuts. I bought it myself.” Larry walked up to him. “Get out of here.” He turned to Doris. “You too. And take that damn clock with you.”

He paused, rubbing his chin. “No. Leave the clock here. It’s mine; I bought it and paid for it.”

In the weeks that followed after Doris left, Larry and the cuckoo clock got along even worse than before. For one thing, the cuckoo stayed inside most of the time, sometimes even at twelve o’clock when he should have been busiest. And if he did come out at all he usually spoke only once or twice, never the correct number of times. And there was a sullen,

uncooperative note in his voice, a jarring sound that made Larry uneasy and a little angry.

But he kept the clock wound, because the house was very still and quiet and it got on his nerves not to hear someone running around, talking and dropping things. And even the whirring of a clock sounded good to him.

But he didn't like the cuckoo at all. And sometimes he spoke to him.

"Listen," he said late one night to the closed little door. "I know you can hear me. I ought to give you back to the Germans — back to the Black Forest." He paced back and forth.

"I wonder what they're doing now, the two of them. That young punk with his books and his antiques. A man shouldn't be interested in antiques; that's for women."

He set his jaw. "Isn't that right?"

The clock said nothing. Larry walked up in front of it. "Isn't that right?" he demanded. "Don't you have anything to say?"

He looked at the face of the clock. It was almost eleven, just a few seconds before the hour. "All right. I'll wait until eleven. Then I want to hear what you have to say. You've been pretty quiet the last few weeks since she left."

He grinned wryly. "Maybe you don't like it here since she's gone." He scowled. "Well, I paid for you, and you're coming out whether you like it or not. You hear me?"

Eleven o'clock came. Far off, at the end of town, the great tower clock boomed sleepily to itself. But the little door remained shut. Nothing moved. The minute hand passed on and the cuckoo did not stir. He was someplace inside the clock, beyond the door, silent and remote.

“All right, if that’s the way you feel,” Larry murmured, his lips twisting. “But it isn’t fair. It’s your job to come out. We all have to do things we don’t like.”

He went unhappily into the kitchen and opened the great gleaming refrigerator. As he poured himself a drink he thought about the clock.

There was no doubt about it — the cuckoo should come out, Doris or no Doris. He had always liked her, from the very start. They had got along well, the two of them. Probably he liked Bob too — probably he had seen enough of Bob to get to know him. They would be quite happy together, Bob and Doris and the cuckoo.

Larry finished his drink. He opened the drawer at the sink and took out the hammer. He carried it carefully into the dining-room. The clock was ticking gently to itself on the wall.

“Look,” he said, waving the hammer. “You know what I have here? You know what I’m going to do with it? I’m going to start on you — first.” He smiled. “Birds of a feather, that’s what you are — the three of you.”

The room was silent.

“Are you coming out? Or do I have to come in and get you?”

The clock whirred a little.

“I hear you in there. You’ve got a lot of talking to do, enough for the last three weeks. As I figure it, you owe me —”

The door opened. The cuckoo came out fast, straight at him. Larry was looking down, his brow wrinkled in thought. He glanced up, and the cuckoo caught him squarely in the eye.

Down he went, hammer and chair and everything, hitting the floor with a tremendous crash. For a moment the cuckoo paused, its small body poised rigidly. Then it went back inside its house. The door snapped tight-shut after it.

The man lay on the floor, stretched out grotesquely, his head bent over to one side. Nothing moved or stirred. The room was completely silent, except, of course, for the ticking of the clock.

"I see," Doris said, her face tight. Bob put his arm around her, steadying her.

"Doctor," Bob said, "can I ask you something?"

"Of course," the doctor said.

"Is it very easy to break your neck, falling from so low a chair? It wasn't very far to fall. I wonder if it might not have been an accident. Is there any chance it might have been —"

"Suicide?" the doctor rubbed his jaw. "I never heard of anyone committing suicide that way. It was an accident; I'm positive."

"I don't mean suicide," Bob murmured under his breath, looking up at the clock on the wall. "I meant *something else.*"

But no one heard him.

Second Variety

The Russian soldier made his way nervously up the ragged side of the hill, holding his gun ready. He glanced around him, licking his dry lips, his face set. From time to time he reached up a gloved hand and wiped perspiration from his neck, pushing down his coat collar.

Eric turned to Corporal Leone. “Want him? Or can I have him?” He adjusted the view sight so the Russian’s features squarely filled the glass, the lines cutting across his hard, somber features.

Leone considered. The Russian was close, moving rapidly, almost running. “Don’t fire. Wait,” Leone tensed. “I don’t think we’re needed.”

The Russian increased his pace, kicking ash and piles of debris out of his way. He reached the top of the hill and stopped, panting, staring around him. The sky was overcast, drifting clouds of gray particles. Bare trunks of trees jutted up occasionally; the ground was level and bare, rubble-strewn, with the ruins of buildings standing out here and there like yellowing skulls.

The Russian was uneasy. He knew something was wrong. He started down the hill. Now he was only a few paces from the bunker. Eric was getting fidgety. He played with his pistol, glancing at Leone.

“Don’t worry,” Leone said. “He won’t get here. They’ll take care of him.”

“Are you sure? He’s got damn far.”

“They hang around close to the bunker. He’s getting into the bad part. Get set!”

The Russian began to hurry, sliding down the hill, his boots sinking into the heaps of gray ash, trying to keep his gun up. He stopped for a moment,

lifting his field-glasses to his face.

"He's looking right at us," Eric said.

The Russian came on. They could see his eyes, like two blue stones. His mouth was open a little. He needed a shave, his chin was stubbled. On one bony cheek was a square of tape, showing blue at the edge. *A fungoid spot*. His coat was muddy and torn. One glove was missing.

As he ran his belt counter bounced up and down against him. Leone touched Eric's arm. "Here one comes." Across the ground something small and metallic came, flashing in the dull sunlight of mid-day. A metal sphere. It raced up the hill after the Russian, its treads flying. It was small, one of the baby ones. Its claws were out, two razor projections spinning in a blur of white steel. The Russian heard it. He turned instantly, firing. The sphere dissolved into particles. But already a second had emerged and was following the first. The Russian fired again.

A third sphere leaped up the Russian's leg, clicking and whirring. It jumped to the shoulder. The spinning blades disappeared into the Russian's throat.

Eric relaxed. "Well, that's that. God, those damn things give me the creeps. Sometimes I think we were better off before."

"If we hadn't invented them, they would have." Leone lit a cigarette shakily. "I wonder why a Russian would come all this way alone. I didn't see anyone covering him."

Lieutenant Scott came slipping up the tunnel, into the bunker. "What happened? Something entered the screen."

"An Ivan."

“Just one?”

Eric brought the screen view around. Scott peered into it. Now there were numerous metal spheres crawling over the prostrate body, dull metal globes clicking and whirring, sawing up the Russian into small parts to be carried away. “What a lot of claws,” Scott murmured.

“They come like flies. Not much game for them any more.” Scott pushed the sight away, disgusted. “Like flies. I wonder why he was out there. They know we have claws all around.” A larger robot had joined the smaller spheres. It was directing operations, a long blunt tube with projecting eyepieces. There was not much left of the soldier. What remained was being brought down the hillside by the host of claws. “Sir,” Leone said. “If it’s all right, I’d like to go out there and take a look at him.”

“Why?”

“Maybe he came with something.”

Scott considered. He shrugged. “All right. But be careful.”

“I have my tab.” Leone patted the metal band at his wrist. “I’ll be out of bounds.”

He picked up his rifle and stepped carefully up to the mouth of the bunker, making his way between blocks of concrete and steel prongs, twisted and bent. The air was cold at the top. He crossed over the ground towards the remains of the soldier, striding across the soft ash. A wind blew around him, swirling gray particles up in his face. He squinted and pushed on.

The claws retreated as he came close, some of them stiffening into immobility. He touched his tab. The Ivan would have given something for that! Short hard radiation emitted from the tab neutralized the claws, put them out of commission. Even the big robot with its two waving eyestalks

retreated respectfully as he approached. He bent down over the remains of the soldier. The gloved hand was closed tightly. There was something in it. Leone pried the fingers apart. A sealed container, aluminum. Still shiny.

He put it in his pocket and made his way back to the bunker. Behind him the claws came back to life, moving into operation again. The procession resumed, metal spheres moving through the gray ash with their loads. He could hear their treads scrabbling against the ground. He shuddered.

Scott watched intently as he brought the shiny tube out of his pocket. “He had that?”

“In his hand.” Leone unscrewed the top. “Maybe you should look at it, sir.”

Scott took it. He emptied the contents out in the palm of his hand. A small piece of silk paper, carefully folded. He sat down by the light and unfolded it.

“What’s it say, sir?” Eric said. Several officers came up the tunnel. Major Hendricks appeared.

“Major,” Scott said. “Look at this.”

Hendricks read the slip. “This just come?”

“A single runner. Just now.”

“Where is he?” Hendricks asked sharply.

“The claws got him.”

Major Hendricks grunted. “Here.” He passed it to his companions. “I think this is what we’ve been waiting for. They certainly took their time

about it.”

“So they want to talk terms,” Scott said. “Are we going along with them?”

“That’s not for us to decide.” Hendricks sat down. “Where’s the communications officer? I want the Moon base.” Leone pondered as the communications officer raised the outside antenna cautiously, scanning the sky above the bunker for any sign of a watching Russian ship.

“Sir,” Scott said to Hendricks. “It’s sure strange they suddenly came around. We’ve been using the claws for almost a year. Now all of a sudden they start to fold.”

“Maybe claws have been getting down in their bunkers.”

“One of the big ones, the kind with stalks, got into an Ivan bunker last week,” Eric said. “It got a whole platoon of them before they got their lid shut.”

“How do you know?”

“A buddy told me. The thing came back with — with remains.”

“Moon base, sir,” the communications officer said. On the screen the face of the lunar monitor appeared. His crisp uniform contrasted to the uniforms in the bunker. And he was clean-shaven. “Moon base.”

“This is forward command L-Whistle. On Terra. Let me have General Thompson.”

The monitor faded. Presently General Thompson’s heavy features came into focus. “What is it, Major?”

“Our claws got a single Russian runner with a message. We don’t know whether to act on it — there have been tricks like this in the past.”

“What’s the message?”

“The Russians want us to send a single officer on policy level over to their lines. For a conference. They don’t state the nature of the conference. They say that matters of —” He consulted the slip. “Matters of grave urgency make it advisable that discussion be opened between a representative of the UN forces and themselves.”

He held the message up to the screen for the general to scan. Thompson’s eyes moved.

“What should we do?” Hendricks asked.

“Send a man out.”

“You don’t think it’s a trap?”

“It might be. But the location they give for their forward command is correct. It’s worth a try, at any rate.”

“I’ll send an officer out. And report the results to you as soon as he returns.”

“All right. Major.” Thompson broke the connection. The screen died. Up above, the antenna came slowly down. Hendricks rolled up the paper, deep in, thought.

“I’ll go,” Leone said.

“They want somebody at policy level.” Hendricks rubbed his jaw. “Policy level. I haven’t been outside in months. Maybe I could use a little air.”

“Don’t you think it’s risky?”

Hendricks lifted the view sight and gazed into it. The remains of the Russian were gone. Only a single claw was in sight. It was folding itself back, disappearing into the ash, like a crab. Like some hideous metal crab…

“That’s the only thing that bothers me.” Hendricks rubbed his wrist. “I know I’m safe as long as I have this on me. But there’s something about them. I hate the damn things. I wish we’d never invented them. There’s something wrong with them. Relentless little —”

“If we hadn’t invented them, the Ivans would have.”

Hendricks pushed the sight back. “Anyhow, it seems to be winning the war. I guess that’s good.”

“Sounds like you’re getting the same jitters as the Ivans.”

Hendricks examined his wrist watch. “I guess I had better get started, if I want to be there before dark.”

He took a deep breath and then stepped out on to the gray, rubbled ground. After a minute he lit a cigarette and stood gazing around him. The landscape was dead. Nothing stirred. He could see for miles, endless ash and slag, ruins of buildings. A few trees without leaves or branches, only the trunks. Above him the eternal rolling clouds of gray, drifting between Terra and the sun.

Major Hendricks went on. Off to the right something scuttled, something round and metallic. A claw, going lickety-split after something. Probably after a small animal, a rat. They got rats, too. As a sort of sideline. He came to the top of the little hill and lifted his field-glasses. The Russian lines were a few miles ahead of him. They had a forward command post there. The runner had come from it.

A squat robot with undulating arms passed by him, its arms weaving inquiringly. The robot went on its way, disappearing under some debris. Hendricks watched it go. He had never seen that type before. There were getting to be more and more types he had never seen, new varieties and sizes coming up from the underground factories. Hendricks put out his cigarette and hurried on.

It was interesting, the use of artificial forms in warfare. How had they got started? Necessity. The Soviet Union had gained great initial success, usual with the side that got the war going. Most of North America had been blasted off the map. Retaliation was quick in coming, of course. The sky was full of circling diskbombers long before the war began, they had been up there for years. The disks began sailing down all over Russia within hours after Washington got it.

But that hadn’t helped Washington.

The American bloc governments moved to the Moon base the first year. There was not much else to do. Europe was gone; a slag heap with dark weeds growing from the ashes and bones. Most of North America was useless; nothing could be planted, no one could live. A few million people kept going up in Canada and down in South America. But during the second year Soviet parachutists began to drop, a few at first, then more and more. They wore the first really effective anti-radiation equipment; what was left of American production moved to the moon along with the governments.

All but the troops. The remaining troops stayed behind as best they could, a few thousand here, a platoon there. No one knew exactly where they were; they stayed where they could, moving around at night, hiding in ruins, in sewers, cellars, with the rats and snakes. It looked as if the Soviet Union had the war almost won. Except for a handful of projectiles fired off from the moon daily, there was almost no weapon in use against them. They came and went as they pleased. The war, for all practical purposes, was over. Nothing effective opposed them.

And then the first claws appeared. And overnight the complexion of the war changed.

The claws were awkward, at first. Slow. The Ivans knocked them off almost as fast as they crawled out of their underground tunnels. But then they got better, faster, and more cunning. Factories, all on Terra, turned them out. Factories a long way underground, behind the Soviet lines, factories that had once made atomic projectiles, now almost forgotten.

The claws got faster, and they got bigger. New types appeared, some with feelers, some that flew. There were a few jumping kinds. The best technicians on the moon were working on designs, making them more and more intricate, more flexible. They became uncanny; the Ivans were having a lot of trouble with them. Some of the little claws were learning to hide themselves, burrowing down into the ash, lying in wait.

And then they started getting into the Russian bunkers, slipping down when the lids were raised for air and a look around. One claw inside a bunker, a churning sphere of blades and metal, that was enough. And when one got in others followed. With a weapon like that the war couldn’t go on much longer.

Maybe it was already over.

Maybe he was going to hear the news. Maybe the Politburo had decided to throw in the sponge. Too bad it had taken so long. Six years. A long time for war like that, the way they had waged it. The automatic retaliation disks, spinning down all over Russia, hundreds of thousands of them. Bacteria crystals. The Soviet guided missiles, whistling through the air. The chain bombs.

And now this, the robots, the claws. The claws weren’t like other weapons. They were alive, from any practical standpoint, whether the Governments wanted to admit it or not. They were not machines. They

were living things, spinning, creeping, shaking themselves up suddenly from the gray ash and darting towards a man, climbing up him, rushing for his throat. And that was what they had been designed to do. Their job.

They did their job well. Especially lately, with the new designs coming up. Now they repaired themselves. They were on their own. Radiation tabs protected the UN troops, but if a man lost his tab he was fair game for the claws, no matter what his uniform. Down below the surface automatic machinery stamped them out. Human beings stayed a long way off. It was too risky; nobody wanted to be around them. They were left to themselves. And they seemed to be doing all right. The new designs were faster, more complex. More efficient.

Apparently they had won the war.

Major Hendricks lit a second cigarette. The landscape depressed him. Nothing but ash and ruins. He seemed to be alone, the only living thing in the whole world. To the right the ruins of a town rose up, a few walls and heaps of debris. He tossed the dead match away, increasing his pace. Suddenly he stopped, jerking up his gun, his body tense. For a minute it looked like —

From behind the shell of a ruined building a figure came, walking slowly towards him, walking hesitantly. Hendricks blinked. “Stop!”

The boy stopped. Hendricks lowered his gun. The boy stood silently, looking at him. He was small, not very old. Perhaps eight. But it was hard to tell. Most of the kids who remained were stunted. He wore a faded blue sweater, ragged with dirt, and short pants. His hair was long and matted. Brown hair. It hung over his face and around his ears. He held something in his arms.

“What’s that you have?” Hendricks said sharply.

The boy held it out. It was a toy, a bear. A teddy bear.

The boy’s eyes were large, but without expression.

Hendricks relaxed. “I don’t want it. Keep it.”

The boy hugged the bear again.

“Where do you live?” Hendricks said.

“In there.”

“The ruins?”

“Yes.”

“Underground?”

“Yes.”

“How many are there?”

“How — how many?”

“How many of you. How big’s your settlement?”

The boy did not answer.

Hendricks frowned. “You’re not all by yourself, are you?”

The boy nodded.

“How do you stay alive?”

“There’s food.”

“What kind of food?”

“Different.”

Hendricks studied him. “How old are you?”

“Thirteen.”

It wasn’t possible. Or was it? The boy was thin, stunted. And probably sterile. Radiation exposure, years straight. No wonder he was so small. His arms and legs were like pipe-cleaners, knobby and thin. Hendricks touched the boy’s arm. His skin was dry and rough; radiation skin. He bent down, looking into the boy’s face. There was no expression. Big eyes, big and dark.

“Are you blind?” Hendricks said.

“No. I can see some.”

“How do you get away from the claws?”

“The claws?”

“The round things. That run and burrow.”

“I don’t understand.”

Maybe there weren’t any claws around. A lot of areas were free. They collected mostly around bunkers, where there were people. The claws had been designed to sense warmth, warmth of living things.

“You’re lucky.” Hendricks straightened up. “Well? Which way are you going? Back — back there?”

“Can I come with you?”

“With *me*?” Hendricks folded his arms. “I’m going a long way. Miles. I have to hurry.” He looked at his watch. “I have to get there by nightfall.”

“I want to come.”

Hendricks fumbled in his pack. “It isn’t worth it. Here.” He tossed down the food cans he had with him. “You take these and go back. Okay?”

The boy said nothing.

“I’ll be coming back this way. In a day or so. If you’re around here when I come back you can come along with me. All right?”

“I want to come along with you now.”

“It’s a long walk.”

“I can walk.”

Hendricks shifted uneasily. It made too good a target, two people walking along. And the boy would slow him down. But he might not come back this way. And if the boy were really all alone —

“Okay. Come along.”

The boy fell in beside him. Hendricks strode along. The boy walked silently, clutching his teddy bear.

“What’s your name?” Hendricks said, after a time.

“David Edward Derring.”

“David? What — what happened to your mother and father?”

“They died.”

“How?”

“In the blast.”

“How long ago?”

“Six years.”

Hendricks slowed down. “You’ve been alone six years?”

“No. There were other people for a while. They went away.”

“And you’ve been alone since?”

“Yes.”

Hendricks glanced down. The boy was strange, saying very little. Withdrawn. But that was the way they were, the children who had survived. Quiet. Stoic. A strange kind of fatalism gripped them. Nothing came as a surprise. They accepted anything that came along. There was no longer any normal, any natural course of things, moral or physical, for them to expect. Custom, habit, all the determining forces of learning were gone; only brute experience remained. “Am I walking too fast?” Hendricks said.

“No.”

“How did you happen to see me?”

“I was waiting.”

“Waiting?” Hendricks was puzzled. “What were you waiting for?”

“To catch things.”

“What kind of things?”

“Things to eat.”

“Oh.” Hendricks set his lips grimly. A thirteen-year-old boy, living on rats and gophers and half-rotten canned food. Down in a hole under the ruins of a town. With radiation pools and claws, and Russian dive-mines up above, coasting around in the sky.

“Where are we going?” David asked.

“To the Russian lines.”

“Russian?”

“The enemy. The people who started the war. They dropped the first radiation bombs. They began all this.”

The boy nodded. His face showed no expression.

“I’m an American,” Hendricks said.

There was no comment. On they went, the two of them, Hendricks walking a little ahead, David trailing behind him, hugging his dirty teddy bear against his chest.

About four in the afternoon they stopped to eat. Hendricks built a fire in a hollow between some slabs of concrete. He cleared the weeds away and heaped up bits of wood. The Russians’ lines were not very far ahead.

Around him was what had once been a long valley, acres of fruit trees and grapes. Nothing remained now but a few bleak stumps and the

mountains that stretched across the horizon at the far end. And the clouds of rolling ash that blew and drifted with the wind, settling over the weeds and remains of buildings, walls, here and there once in a while what had been a road.

Hendricks made coffee and heated up some boiled mutton and bread. “Here.” He handed bread and mutton to David. David squatted by the edge of the fire, his knees knobby and white. He examined the food and then passed it back shaking his head.

“No.”

“No? Don’t you want any?”

“No.”

Hendricks shrugged. Maybe the boy was a mutant, used to special food. It didn’t matter. When he was hungry he would find something to eat. The boy was strange. But there were many strange changes coming over the world. Life was not the same anymore. It would never be the same again. The human race was going to have to realize that. “Suit yourself,” Hendricks said. He ate the bread and mutton by himself, washing it down with coffee. He ate slowly, finding the food hard to digest. When he was done he got to his feet and stamped the fire out.

David rose slowly, watching him with his young-old eyes.

“We’re going,” Hendricks said.

“All right.”

Hendricks walked along, his gun in his arms. They were close; he was tense, ready for anything. The Russians should be expecting a runner, an answer to their own runner, but they were tricky. There was always the

possibility of a slip-up. He scanned the landscape around him. Nothing but slag and ash, a few hills, charred trees. Concrete walls. But somewhere ahead was the first bunker of the Russian lines, the forward command. Underground, buried deep, with only a periscope showing, a few gun muzzles. Maybe an antenna.

"Will we be there soon?" David asked.

"Yes. Getting tired?"

"No."

"Why, then?"

David did not answer. He plodded carefully along behind, picking his way over the ash. His legs and shoes were gray with dust. His pinched face was streaked, lines of gray ash in rivulets down the pale white of his skin. There was no color to his face. Typical of the new children, growing up in cellars and sewers and underground shelters. Hendricks slowed down. He lifted his field-glasses and studied the ground ahead of him. Were they there, someplace, waiting for him? Watching him, the way his men had watched the Russian runner? A chill went up his back. Maybe they were getting their guns ready, preparing to fire, the way his men had prepared, made ready to kill. Hendricks stopped, wiping perspiration from his face.

"Damn." It made him uneasy. But he should be expected.

The situation was different.

He strode over the ash, holding his gun tightly with both hands. Behind him came Davis. Hendricks peered around, tight-lipped. Any second it might happen. A burst of white light, a blast, carefully aimed from inside a deep concrete bunker.

He raised his arm and waved it around in a circle. Nothing moved. To the right a long ridge ran, topped with dead tree trunks. A few wild vines had grown up around the trees, remains of arbors. And the eternal dark weeds. Hendricks studied the ridge. *Was anything up there?* Perfect place for a lookout.

He approached the ridge warily, David coming silently behind. If it were his command he'd have a sentry up there, watching for troops trying to infiltrate into the command area. Of course, if it were his command there would be claws around the area for full protection. He stopped, feet apart, hands on his hips.

"Are we there?" David said.

"Almost."

"Why have we stopped?"

"I don't want to take any chances." Hendricks advanced slowly. Now the ridge lay directly beside him, along his right. Overlooking him. His uneasy feeling increased. If an Ivan were up there he wouldn't have a chance. He waved his arm again. They should be expecting someone in the UN uniform, in response to the note capsule. Unless the whole thing was a trap.

"Keep up with me." He turned towards David. "Don't drop behind."

"With you?"

"Up beside me. We're close. We can't take any chances. Come on."

"I'll be all right." David remained behind him, in the rear, a few paces away, still clutching his teddy bear.

“Have it your way.” Hendricks raised his glasses again, suddenly tense. For a moment — had something moved? He scanned the ridge carefully. Everything was silent. Dead. No life up there, only tree trunks and ash. Maybe a few rats. The big black rats that had survived the claws. Mutants built their own shelters out of saliva and ash. Some kind of plaster. Adaptation.

He started forward again. A tall figure came out on the ridge above him, cloak flapping. Gray-green. A Russian. Behind him a second soldier appeared, Russian. Both lifted their guns, aiming. Hendricks froze. He opened his mouth. The soldiers were kneeling, sighting down the side of the slope. A third figure had joined them on the ridge top, a smaller figure in gray-green. A woman. She stood behind the other two.

Hendricks found his voice. “Stop!” He waved at them frantically. “I’m __”

The two Russians fired. Behind Hendricks there was a faint *pop*. Waves of heat lapped against him, throwing him to the ground. Ash tore at his face, grinding into his eyes and nose. Choking, he pulled himself to his knees. It was all a trap. He was finished. He had come to be killed, like a steer. The soldiers and the woman were coming down the side of the ridge towards him, sliding down through the soft ash. Hendricks was numb. His head throbbed. Awkwardly, he got his rifle up and took aim. It weighed a thousand tons; he could hardly hold it. His nose and cheeks stung. The air was full of the blast smell, a bitter acrid stench.

“Don’t fire,” the first Russian said, in heavily accented English.

The three of them came up to him, surrounding him. “Put down your rifle, Yank,” the other said.

Hendricks was dazed. Everything had happened so fast. He had been caught. And they had blasted the boy. He turned his head. David was gone. What remained of him was strewn across the ground.

The three Russians studied him curiously. Hendricks sat, wiping blood from his nose, picking out bits of ash. He shook his head, trying to clear it. “Why did you do it?” he murmured thickly. “The boy.”

“Why?” One of the soldiers helped him roughly to his feet He turned Hendricks around. “Look.”

Hendricks closed his eyes.

“Look.” The two Russians pulled him forward. “See. Hurry up. There isn’t much time to spare, Yank!”

Hendricks looked. And gasped.

“See now? Now do you understand?”

From the remains of David a metal wheel rolled. Relays, glinting metal. Parts, wiring. One of the Russians kicked at the heap of remains. Parts popped out, rolling away, wheels and springs and rods. A plastic section fell in, half charred. Hendricks bent shakily down. The front of the head had come off. He could make out the intricate brain, wires and relays, tiny tubes and switches, thousands of minute studs —

“A robot,” the soldier holding his arm said. “We watched it tagging you.”

“Tagging me?”

“That’s their way. They tag along with you. Into the bunker. That’s how they get in.”

Hendricks blinked, dazed. “But —”

“Come on.” They led him towards the ridge, sliding and slipping on the ash. The woman reached the top and stood waiting for them.

“The forward command,” Hendricks muttered. “I came to negotiate with the Soviet —”

“There is no more forward command. *They* got in. We’ll explain.” They reached the top of the ridge. “We’re all that’s left. The three of us. The rest were down in the bunker.”

“This way. Down this way.” The woman unscrewed a lid, a gray manhole cover set in the ground. “Get in.”

Hendricks lowered himself. The two soldiers and the woman came behind him, following him down the ladder. The woman closed the lid after them, bolting it tightly into place.

“Good thing we saw you,” one of the two soldiers grunted.

“It had tagged you about as far as it was going to.”

“Give me one of your cigarettes,” the woman said. “I haven’t had an American cigarette for weeks.”

Hendricks pushed the pack to her. She took a cigarette and passed the pack to the two soldiers. In the corner of the small room the lamp gleamed fitfully. The room was low-ceilinged, cramped. The four of them sat around a small wood table. A few dirty dishes were stacked to one side. Behind a ragged curtain a second room was partly visible. Hendricks saw the corner of a cot, some blankets, clothes hung on a hook.

“We were here,” the soldier beside him said. He took off his helmet, pushing his blond hair back. “I’m Corporal Rudi Maxer. Polish. Impressed in the Soviet Army two years ago.” He held out his hand.

Hendricks hesitated and then shook. “Major Joseph Hendricks.”

“Klaus Epstein.” The other soldier shook with him, a small dark man with thinning hair. Epstein plucked nervously at his ear. “Austrian. Impressed God knows when. I don’t remember. The three of us were here, Rudi and I, with Tasso.” He indicated the woman. “That’s how we escaped. All the rest were down in the bunker.”

“And — and *they* got in?”

Epstein lit a cigarette. “First just one of them. The kind that tagged you. Then it let others in.”

Hendricks became alert. “The *kind*? Are there more than one kind?”

“The little boy. David. David holding his teddy bear. That’s *Variety Three*. The most effective.”

“What are the other types?”

Epstein reached into his coat. “Here.” He tossed a packet of photographs on to the table, tied with a string. “Look for yourself.”

Hendricks untied the string.

“You see,” Rudi Maxer said, “that was why we wanted to talk terms. The Russians I mean. We found out about a week ago. Found out that your claws were beginning to make up new designs on their own. New *types* of their own. *Better* types. Down in your underground factories behind our lines. You let them stamp themselves, repair themselves. Made them more and more intricate. It’s your fault this happened.”

Hendricks examined the photos. They had been snapped hurriedly; they were blurred and indistinct. The first few showed David. David walking along a road, by himself. David and another David. Three Davids. All exactly alike. Each with a ragged teddy bear.

All pathetic.

“Look at the others,” Tasso said.

The next picture, taken at a great distance, showed a towering wounded soldier sitting by the side of a path, his arm in a sling, the stump of one leg extended, a crude crutch on his lap. Then two wounded soldiers, both the same, standing side by side.

“That’s *Variety One*. The Wounded Soldier.” Klaus reached out and took the pictures. “You see, the claws were designed to get to human beings. To find them. Each kind was better than the last. They got farther, closer, past most of our defenses, into our lines. But as long as they were merely machines, metal spheres with claws and horns, feelers, they could be picked off like any other object. They could be detected as lethal robots as soon as they were seen. Once we caught sight of them —”

“*Variety One* subverted our whole north wing,” Rudi said. “It was a long time before anyone caught on. Then it was too late. They came in, wounded soldiers, knocking and begging to be let in. So we let them in. And as soon as they were in they took over. We were watching out for machines…”

“At that time it was thought there was only the one type,” Klaus Epstein said. “No one suspected there were other types. The pictures were flashed to us. When the runner was sent to you, we knew of just one type. *Variety One*. The big Wounded Soldier. We thought that was all.”

“Your line fell to —”

“To *Variety Three*. David and his bear. That worked even better.” Klaus smiled bitterly. “Soldiers are suckers for children. We brought them in and tried to feed them. We found out the hard way what they were after. At least, those who were in the bunker.”

“The three of us were lucky,” Rudi said. “Klaus and I were — were visiting Tasso when it happened. This is her place.” He waved a big hand around. “This little cellar. We… finished… and climbed the ladder to start back. From the ridge, we saw. There they were, all around the bunker. Fighting was still going on. David and his bear. Hundreds of them. Klaus took the pictures.”

Klaus tied up the photographs again.

“And it’s going on all along your line?” Hendricks said.

“Yes.”

“How about *our* lines?” Without thinking, he touched the tab on his arm. “Can they —”

“They’re not bothered by your radiation tabs. It makes no difference to them, Russian, American, Pole, German. It’s all the same. They’re doing what they were designed to do. Carrying out the original idea. They track down life, wherever they find it.”

“They go by warmth,” Klaus said. “That was the way you constructed them from the very start. Of course, those you designed were kept back by the radiation tabs you wear. Now they’ve got around that. These new varieties are lead-lined.”

“What’s the other variety?” Hendricks asked. “The David type, The Wounded Soldier — what’s the other?”

“We don’t know.” Klaus pointed up at the wall. On the wall were two metal plates, ragged at the edges. Hendricks got up and studied them. They were bent and dented. “The one on the left came off a Wounded Soldier,” Rudi said. “We got one of them. It was going along towards our old bunker. We got it from the ridge, the same way we got the David tagging you.”

The plate was stamped: I-V. Hendricks touched the other plate. “And this came from the David type?”

“Yes.”

The plate was stamped: III-V.

Klaus took a look at them, leaning over Hendricks’ broad shoulder. “You can see what we’re up against. There’s another type. Maybe it was abandoned. Maybe it didn’t work. But there must be a *Second Variety*. There’s *One* and *Three*.”

“You were lucky,” Rudi said. “The David tagged you all the way here and never touched you. Probably thought you’d get it into a bunker, somewhere.”

“One gets in and it’s all over,” Klaus said. “They move fast. One lets all the rest inside. They’re inflexible. Machines with one purpose. They were built for only one thing.” He rubbed sweat from his lip. “We saw.”

They were silent.

“Let me have another cigarette, Yank,” Tasso said. “They are good. I almost forgot how they were.”

It was night. The sky was black. No stars were visible through the rolling clouds of ash. Klaus lifted the lid cautiously so that Hendricks could look out. Rudi pointed into the darkness. “Over that way are the bunkers. Where *we* used to be. Not over a half a mile from us. It was just chance Klaus and I were not there when it happened. Weakness. Saved by our lusts.”

“All the rest must be dead,” Klaus said in a low voice. “It came quickly. This morning the Politburo reached their decision. They notified us —

forward command. Our runner was sent out at once. We saw him start towards the direction of your lines. We covered him until he was out of sight."

"Alex Radrivsky. We both knew him. He disappeared about six o'clock. The sun had just come up. About noon Klaus and I had an hour relief. We crept off, away from the bunkers. No one was watching. We came here. There used to be a town here, a few houses, a street. This cellar was part of a big farmhouse. We knew Tasso would be here, hiding down in her little place. We had come here before. Others from the bunkers came here. Today happened to be our turn."

"So we were saved," Klaus said. "Chance. It might have been others. We — we finished, and then we came up to the surface and started back along the ridge. That was when we saw them, the Davids. We understood right away. We had seen the photos of the First Variety, the Wounded Soldier. Our Commissar distributed them to us with an explanation. If we had gone another step they would have seen us. As it was we had to blast two Davids before we got back. There were hundreds of them, all around. Like ants. We took pictures and slipped back here, bolting the lid tight."

"They're not so much when you catch them alone. We moved faster than they did. But they're inexorable. Not like living things. They came right at us. And we blasted them."

Major Hendricks rested against the edge of the lid adjusting his eyes to the darkness. "Is it safe to have the lid up at all?"

"If we're careful. How else can you operate your transmitter?"

Hendricks lifted the small belt transmitter slowly. He pressed it against his ear. The metal was cold and damp. He blew against the mike, raising up the short antenna. A faint hum sounded in his ear. "That's true, I suppose." But he still hesitated.

"We'll pull you under if anything happens," Klaus said.

“Thanks.” Hendricks waited a moment, resting the transmitter against his shoulder. “Interesting, isn’t it?”

“What?”

“This, the new types. The new varieties of claws. We’re completely at their mercy, aren’t we? By now they’ve probably gotten into the UN lines, too. It makes me wonder if we’re not seeing the beginning of a new species. *The* new species. Evolution. The race to come after man.”

Rudi grunted. “There is no race after man.”

“No? Why not? Maybe we’re seeing it now, the end of human beings, the beginning of the new society.”

“They’re not a race. They’re mechanical killers. You made them to destroy. That’s all they can do. They’re machines with a job.”

“So it seems now. But how about later on? After the war is over. Maybe, when there aren’t any humans to destroy, their real potentialities will begin to show.”

“You talk as if they were *alive*!”

“Aren’t they?”

There was silence. “They’re machines,” Rudi said. “They look like people, but they’re machines.”

“Use your transmitter, Major,” Klaus said. “We can’t stay up here forever.”

Holding the transmitter tightly Hendricks called the code of the command bunker. He waited, listening. No response. Only silence. He

checked the leads carefully. Everything was in place.

"Scott!" he said into the mike. "Can you hear me?" Silence. He raised the mast up full and tried again. Only static.

"I don't get anything. They may hear me but they may not want to answer."

"Tell them it's an emergency."

"They'll think I'm being forced to call. Under your direction." He tried again, outlining briefly what he had learned. But still the phone was silent, except for the faint static. "Radiation pools kill most transmission," Klaus said, after awhile. "Maybe that's it."

Hendricks shut the transmitter up. "No use. No answer. Radiation pools? Maybe. Or they hear me, but won't answer. Frankly, that's what I would do, if a runner tried to call from the Soviet lines. They have no reason to believe such a story. They may hear everything I say —"

"Or maybe it's too late."

Hendricks nodded.

"We better get the lid down," Rudi said nervously. "We don't want to take unnecessary chances." They climbed slowly back down the tunnel. Klaus bolted the lid carefully into place. They descended into the kitchen. The air was heavy and close around them. "Could they work that fast?" Hendricks said. "I left the bunker this noon. Ten hours ago. How could they move so quickly?"

"It doesn't take them long. Not after the first one gets in. It goes wild. You know what the little claws can do. Even one of these is beyond belief. Razors, each finger. Maniacal."

“All right.” Hendricks moved away impatiently. He stood with his back to them.

“What’s the matter?” Rudi said.

“The Moon base. God, if they’ve gotten there —”

“The Moon base?”

Hendricks turned around. “They couldn’t have got to the Moon base. How would they get there? It isn’t possible. I can’t believe it.”

“What is this Moon base? We’ve heard rumors, but nothing definite. What is the actual situation? You seem concerned.”

“We’re supplied from the moon. The governments are there, under the lunar surface. All our people and industries. That’s what keeps us going. If they should find some way of getting off Terra, on to the moon —”

“It only takes one of them. Once the first one gets in it admits the others. Hundreds of them, all alike. You should have *seen* them. Identical. Like ants.”

“Perfect socialism,” Tasso said. “The ideal of the Communist state. All citizens interchangeable.”

Klaus grunted angrily. “That’s enough. Well? What next?”

Hendricks paced back and forth, around the small room. The air was full of smells of food and perspiration. The others watched him. Presently Tasso pushed through the curtain, into the other room. “I’m going to take a nap.” The curtain closed behind her. Rudi and Klaus sat down at the table, still watching Hendricks. “It’s up to you,” Klaus said. “We don’t know your situation.”

Hendricks nodded.

“It’s a problem.” Rudi drank some coffee, filling his cup from a rusty pot. “We’re safe here for a while, but we can’t stay here forever. Not enough food or supplies.”

“But if we go outside —”

“If we go outside they’ll get us. Or probably they’ll get us. We couldn’t go very far. How far is your command bunker, Major?”

“What if they’re already there?” Klaus said.

Rudi shrugged. “Well, then we come back here.”

Hendricks stopped pacing. “What do you think the chances are they’re already in the American lines?”

“Hard to say. Fairly good. They’re organized. They know exactly what they’re doing. Once they start they go like a horde of locusts. They have to keep moving, and fast. It’s secrecy and speed they depend on. Surprise. They push their way in before anyone has any idea.”

“I see,” Hendricks murmured.

From the other room Tasso stirred. “Major?”

Hendricks pushed the curtain back. “What?”

Tasso looked up at him lazily from the cot. “Have you any more American cigarettes left?”

Hendricks went into the room and sat down across from her, on a wood stool. He felt in his pockets. “No. All gone.”

“Too bad.”

“What nationality are you?” Hendricks asked after a while.

“Russian.”

“How did you get here?”

“Here?”

“This used to be France. This was part of Normandy. Did you come with the Soviet army?”

“Why?”

“Just curious.” He studied her. She had taken off her coat, tossing it over the end of the cot. She was young, about twenty. Slim. Her long hair stretched out over the pillow. She was staring at him silently, her eyes dark and large.

“What’s on your mind?” Tasso said.

“Nothing. How old are you?”

“Eighteen.” She continued to watch him, unblinking, her arms behind her head. She had on Russian army pants and shirt. Gray-green. Thick leather belt with counter and cartridges. Medicine kit.

“You’re in the Soviet army?”

“No.”

“Where did you get the uniform?”

She shrugged. “It was given to me,” she told him.

“How… how old were you when you came here?”

“Sixteen.”

“That young?”

Her eyes narrowed. “What do you mean?”

Hendricks rubbed his jaw. “Your life would have been a lot different if there had been no war. Sixteen. You came here at sixteen. To live this way.”

“I had to survive.”

“I’m not moralizing.”

“Your life would have been different, too,” Tasso murmured. She reached down and unfastened one of her boots. She kicked the boot off, on to the floor. “Major, do you want to go in the other room? I’m sleepy.”

“It’s going to be a problem, the four of us here. It’s going to be hard to live in these quarters. Are there just two rooms?”

“Yes.”

“How big was the cellar originally? Was it larger than this? Are there other rooms filled up with debris? We might be able to open one of them.”

“Perhaps. I really don’t know.” Tasso loosened her belt. She made herself comfortable on the cot, unbuttoning her shirt. “You’re sure you have

no more cigarettes?”

“I had only the one pack.”

“Too bad. Maybe if we get back to your bunker we can find some.” The other boot fell. Tasso reached up for the light cord. “Good night.”

“You’re going to sleep?”

“That’s right.”

The room plunged into darkness. Hendricks got up and made his way past the curtain, into the kitchen. And stopped, rigid.

Rudi stood against the wall, his face white and gleaming. His mouth opened and closed but no sounds came. Klaus stood in front of him, the muzzle of his pistol in Rudi’s stomach. Neither of them moved. Klaus, his hand tight around his gun, his features set. Rudi, pale and silent, spread-eagled against the wall.

“What —” Hendricks muttered, but Klaus cut him off.

“Be quiet, Major. Come over here. Your gun. Get out your gun.”

Hendricks drew his pistol. “What is it?”

“Cover him.” Klaus motioned him forward. “Beside me. Hurry!”

Rudi moved a little, lowering his arms. He turned to Hendricks, licking his lips. The whites of his eyes shone wildly. Sweat dripped from his forehead, down his cheeks. He fixed his gaze on Hendricks. “Major, he’s gone insane. Stop him.” Rudi’s voice was thin and hoarse, almost inaudible.

“What’s going on?” Hendricks demanded.

Without lowering his pistol Klaus answered. “Major, remember our discussion? The three varieties? We knew about *One* and *Three*. But we didn’t know about *Two*. At least, we didn’t know before.” Klaus’ fingers tightened around the gun butt. “We didn’t know before, but we know now.” He pressed the trigger. A burst of white heat rolled out of the gun, licking around Rudi.

“Major, this is the *Second Variety*.”

Tasso swept the curtain aside. “Klaus! What did you do?”

Klaus turned from the charred form, gradually sinking down the wall on to the floor. “The *Second Variety*, Tasso. Now we know. We have all three types identified. The danger is less. I —”

Tasso stared past him at the remains of Rudi, at the blackened, smoldering fragments and bits of cloth. “You killed him.”

“Him? It, you mean. I was watching. I had a feeling, but I wasn’t sure. At least, I wasn’t sure before. But this evening I was certain.” Klaus rubbed his pistol butt nervously. “We’re lucky. Don’t you understand? Another hour and it might —”

“You were certain?” Tasso pushed past him and bent down, over the steaming remains on the floor. Her face became hard. “Major, see for yourself. Bones. Flesh.”

Hendricks bent down beside her. The remains were human remains. Seared flesh, charred bone fragments, part of a skull. Ligaments, viscera, blood. Blood forming a pool against the wall.

“No wheels,” Tasso said calmly. She straightened up. “No wheels, no parts, no relays. Not a claw. Not the *Second Variety*.” She folded her arms. “You’re going to have to be able to explain this.”

Klaus sat down at the table, all the color drained suddenly from his face. He put his head in his hands and rocked back and forth.

"Snap out of it." Tasso's fingers closed over his shoulder. "Why did you do it? Why did you kill him?"

"He was frightened," Hendricks said. "All this, the whole thing, building up around us."

"Maybe."

"What, then? What do you think?"

"I think he may have had a reason for killing Rudi. A good reason."

"What reason?"

"Maybe Rudi learned something."

Hendricks studied her bleak face. "About what?" he asked.

"About him. About Klaus."

Klaus looked up quickly. "You can see what she's trying to say. She thinks *I'm* the *Second Variety*. Don't you see, Major? Now she wants you to believe I killed him on purpose. That I'm —"

"Why did you kill him, then?" Tasso said.

"I told you." Klaus shook his head wearily. "I thought he was a claw. I thought I knew."

"Why?"

“I had been watching him. I was suspicious.”

“Why?”

“I thought I had seen something. Heard something. I thought I heard him *whirr*.”

There was silence.

“Do you believe that?” Tasso said to Hendricks.

“Yes. I believe what he says.”

“I don’t. I think he killed Rudi for a good purpose.” Tasso touched the rifle, resting in the corner of the room. “Major —”

“No.” Hendricks shook his head. “Let’s stop it right now. One is enough. We’re afraid, the way *he* was. If we kill him we’ll be doing what he did to Rudi.”

Klaus looked gratefully up at him. “Thanks. I was afraid. You understand, don’t you? Now she’s afraid, the way I was. She wants to kill me.”

“No more killing.” Hendricks moved towards the end of the ladder. “I’m going above and try the transmitter once more. If I can’t get them we’re moving back towards my lines tomorrow morning.”

Klaus rose quickly. “I’ll come up with you and give you a hand.”

The night air was cold. The earth was cooling off. Klaus took a deep breath, filling his lungs. He and Hendricks stepped on to the ground, out of the tunnel. Klaus planted his feet wide apart, the rifle up, watching and

listening. Hendricks crouched by the tunnel mouth, turning the small transmitter.

“Any luck?” Klaus asked presently.

“Not yet.”

“Keep trying. Tell them what happened.”

Hendricks kept trying. Without success. Finally he lowered the antenna. “It’s useless. They can’t hear me. Or they hear me and won’t answer. Or __”

“Or they don’t exist.”

“I’ll try once more.” Hendricks raised the antenna. “Scott, can you hear me? Come in!”

He listened. There was only static. Then, still very faintly, “This is Scott.”

His fingers tightened. “Scott! Is it you?”

“This is Scott.”

Klaus squatted down. “Is it your command?”

“Scott, listen. Do you understand? About them, the claws. Did you get my message? Did you hear me?”

“Yes.” Faintly. Almost inaudible. He could hardly make out the word.

“You got my message? Is everything all right at the bunker? None of them have got in?”

“Everything is all right.”

“Have they tried to get in?”

The voice was weaker.

“No.”

Hendricks turned to Klaus. “They’re all right.”

“Have they been attacked?”

“No.” Hendricks pressed the phone tighter to his ear. “Scott, I can hardly hear you. Have you notified the Moon Base? Do they know? Are they alerted?”

No answer.

“Scott! Can you hear me?”

Silence.

Hendricks relaxed, sagging. “Faded out. Must be radiation pools.”

Hendricks and Klaus looked at each other. Neither of them said anything. After a time Klaus said, “Did it sound like any of your men? Could you identify the voice?”

“It was too faint.”

“You couldn’t be certain?”

“No.”

“Then it could have been —”

“I don’t know. Now I’m not sure. Let’s go back down and get the lid closed.”

They climbed back down the ladder slowly into the warm cellar. Klaus bolted the lid behind them. Tasso waited for them, her face expressionless.

“Any luck?” she asked.

Neither of them answered. “Well?” Klaus said at last. “What do *you* think, Major? Was it your officer, or was it one of *them*?”

“I don’t know.”

“Then we’re just where we were before.” Hendricks stared down at the floor, his jaw set. “We’ll have to go. To be sure.”

“Anyhow, we have food here for only a few weeks. We’d have to go up after that, in any case.”

“Apparently so.”

“What’s wrong?” Tasso demanded. “Did you get across to your bunker? What’s the matter?”

“It may have been one of my men,” Hendricks said slowly. “Or it may have been one of them. But we’ll never know standing here.” He examined his watch. “Let’s turn in and get some sleep. We want to be up early tomorrow.”

“Early?”

“Our best chance to get through the claws should be early in the morning,” Hendricks said.

The morning was crisp and clear. Major Hendricks studied the countryside through his field-glasses.

“See anything?” Klaus said.

“No.”

“Can you make out our bunkers?”

“Which way?”

“Here.” Klaus took the glasses and adjusted them. “I know where to look.” He looked a long time, silently. Tasso came to the top of the tunnel and stepped up on to the ground. “Anything?”

“No.” Klaus passed the glasses back to Hendricks. “They’re out of sight. Come on. Let’s not stay here.” The three of them made their way down the side of the ridge, sliding in the soft ash. Across a flat rock a lizard scuttled. They stopped instantly, rigid.

“What was it?” Klaus muttered.

“A lizard.”

The lizard ran on, hurrying through the ash. It was exactly the same color as the ash.

“Perfect adaptation,” Klaus said. “Proves we were right. Lysenko, I mean.”

They reached the bottom of the ridge and stopped, standing close together, looking around them. “Let’s go.” Hendricks started off. “It’s a good long trip, on foot.”

Klaus fell in beside him. Tasso walked behind, her pistol held alertly. “Major, I’ve been meaning to ask you something,” Klaus said. “How did you run across the David? The one that was tagging you.”

“I met it along the way. In some ruins.”

“What did it say?”

“Not much. It said it was alone. By itself.”

“You couldn’t tell it was a machine? It talked like a living person? You never suspected?”

“It didn’t say much. I noticed nothing unusual.”

“It’s strange, machines so much like people that you can be fooled. Almost alive. I wonder where it’ll end.”

“They’re doing what you Yanks designed them to do,” Tasso said. “You designed them to hunt out life and destroy. Human life. Wherever they find it.”

Hendricks was watching Klaus intently. “Why did you ask me? What’s on your mind?”

“Nothing,” Klaus answered.

“Klaus thinks you’re the *Second Variety*,” Tasso said calmly, from behind them. “Now he’s got his eye on you.”

Klaus flushed. “Why not? We sent a runner to the Yank lines and he comes back. Maybe he thought he’d find some good game here.”

Hendricks laughed harshly. “I came from the UN bunkers. There were human beings all around me.”

“Maybe you saw an opportunity to get into the Soviet lines. Maybe you saw your chance. Maybe you —”

“The Soviet lines had already been taken over. Your lines had been invaded before I left my command bunker. Don’t forget that.”

Tasso came up beside him. “That proves nothing at all, Major.”

“Why not?”

“There appears to be little communication between the varieties. Each is made in a different factory. They don’t seem to work together. You might have started for the Soviet lines without knowing anything about the work of the other varieties. Or even what the other varieties were like.”

“How do you know so much about the claws?” Hendricks said.

“I’ve seen them. I’ve observed them. I observed them take over the Soviet bunkers.”

“You know quite a lot,” Klaus said. “Actually, you saw very little. Strange that you should have been such an acute observer.”

Tasso laughed. “Do you suspect me, now?”

“Forget it,” Hendricks said. They walked on in silence.

“Are we going the whole way on foot?” Tasso said, after a while. “I’m not used to walking.” She gazed around at the plain of ash, stretching out on all sides of them, as far as they could see. “How dreary.”

“It’s like this all the way,” Klaus said.

“In a way I wish you had been in your bunker when the attack came.”

“Somebody else would have been with you, if not me,” Klaus muttered.

Tasso laughed, putting her hands in her pockets. “I suppose so.”

They walked on, keeping their eyes on the vast plain of silent ash around them.

The sun was setting. Hendricks made his way forward slowly, waving Tasso and Klaus back. Klaus squatted down, resting his gun butt against the ground. Tasso found a concrete slab and sat down with a sigh.

“It’s good to rest.”

“Be quiet,” Klaus said sharply.

Hendricks pushed up to the top of the rise ahead of them. The same rise the Russian runner had come up, the day before. Hendricks dropped down, stretching himself out, peering through his glasses at what lay beyond. Nothing was visible. Only ash and occasional trees. But there, not more than fifty yards ahead, was the entrance of the forward command bunker. The bunker from which he had come. Hendricks watched silently. No motion. No sign of life. Nothing stirred.

Klaus slithered up beside him. “Where is it?”

“Down there.” Hendricks passed him the glasses. Clouds of ash rolled across the evening sky. The world was darkening. They had a couple of hours of light left, at the most. Probably not that much.

“I don’t see anything,” Klaus said.

“That tree there. The stump. By the pile of bricks. The entrance is to the right of the bricks.”

“I’ll have to take your word for it.”

“You and Tasso cover me from here. You’ll be able to sight all the way to the bunker entrance.”

“You’re going down alone?”

“With my wrist tab I’ll be safe. The ground around the bunker is a living field of claws. They collect down in the ash. Like crabs. Without tabs you wouldn’t have a chance.”

“Maybe you’re right.”

“I’ll walk slowly all the way. As soon as I know for certain —”

“If they’re down inside the bunker you won’t be able to get back up here. They go fast. You don’t realize.”

“What do you suggest?”

Klaus considered. “I don’t know. Get them to come up to the surface. So you can see.”

Hendricks brought his transmitter from his belt, raising the antenna. “Let’s get started.”

Klaus signaled to Tasso. She crawled expertly up the side of the rise to where they were sitting.

“He’s going down alone,” Klaus said. “We’ll cover him from here. As soon as you see him start back, fire past him at once. They come quick.”

“You’re not very optimistic,” Tasso said.

“No, I’m not.”

Hendricks opened the breech of his gun, checking it carefully. “Maybe things are all right.”

“You didn’t see them. Hundreds of them. All the same. Pouring out like ants.”

“I should be able to find out without going down all the way.” Hendricks locked his gun, gripping it in one hand, the transmitter in the other. “Well, wish me luck.”

Klaus put out his hand. “Don’t go down until you’re sure. Talk to them from up here. Make them show themselves.”

Hendricks stood up. He stepped down the side of the rise. A moment later he was walking slowly towards the pile of bricks and debris beside the dead tree stump. Towards the entrance of the forward command bunker. Nothing stirred. He raised the transmitter, clicking it on.

“Scott? Can you hear me?”

Silence.

“Scott! This is Hendricks. Can you hear me? I’m standing outside the bunker. You should be able to see me in the view sight.”

He listened, the transmitter gripped tightly. No sound. Only static. He walked forward. A claw burrowed out of the ash and raced towards him, studied him intently, and then fell in behind him, dogging respectfully after him, a few paces away. A moment later a second big claw joined it. Silently, the claws trailed him, as he walked slowly towards the bunker.

Hendricks stopped, and behind him, the claws came to a halt. He was close now. Almost to the bunker steps. "*Scott*! Can you hear me? I'm standing right above you. Outside. On the surface. Are you picking me up?" He waited, holding his gun against his side, the transmitter tightly to his ear. Time passed. He strained to hear, but there was only silence, and faint static.

Then, distantly, metallically, "This is Scott."

The voice was neutral. Cold. He could not identify it. But the earphone was minute.

"Scott, listen. I'm standing right above you. I'm on the surface, looking down into the bunker entrance."

"Yes."

"Can you see me?"

"Yes."

"Through the view sight? You have the sight trained on me?"

"Yes."

Hendricks pondered. A circle of claws waited quietly on all sides of him. "Is everything all right in the bunker? Nothing unusual has happened?"

“Everything is all right.”

“Will you come up to the surface? I want to see you for a moment.” Hendricks took a deep breath. “Come up here with me. I want to talk to you.”

“Come down.”

“I’m giving you an order.”

Silence.

“Are you coming?” Hendricks listened. There was no response. “I order you to come to the surface.”

“Come down.”

Hendricks set his jaw. “Let me talk to Leone.”

There was a long pause. He listened to the static. Then a voice came, hard, thin, metallic. The same as the other. “This is Leone.”

“Hendricks. I’m on the surface. At the bunker entrance. I want one of you to come up here.”

“Come down.”

“Why come down? I’m giving you an order!” Silence. Hendricks lowered the transmitter. He looked carefully around him. The entrance was just ahead. Almost at his feet. He lowered the antenna and fastened the transmitter to his belt. Carefully, he gripped his gun with both hands. He moved forward, a step at a time. If they could see him they knew he was starting towards the entrance. He closed his eyes a moment.

Then he put his foot on the first step that led downward. Two Davids came up at him, their faces identical and expressionless. He blasted them into particles. More came rushing silently up, a whole pack of them. All exactly the same.

Hendricks turned and raced back, away from the bunker, back towards the rise.

At the top of the rise Tasso and Klaus were firing down. The small claws were already streaking up toward them, shining metal spheres going fast, racing frantically through the ash. But he had no time to think about that.

He knelt down, aiming at the bunker entrance, gun against his cheek. The Davids were coming out in groups, clutching their teddy bears, their thin knobby legs pumping as they ran up the steps to the surface. Hendricks fired into the main body of them. They burst apart, wheels and springs flying in all directions. He fired again, through the mist of particles.

A giant lumbering figure rose up in the bunker entrance, tall and swaying. Hendricks paused, amazed. A man, a soldier. With one leg, supporting himself with a crutch.

“Major!” Tasso’s voice came. More firing. The huge figure moved forward, Davids swarming around it. Hendricks broke out of his freeze. The *First Variety*. The Wounded Soldier. He aimed and fired. The soldier burst into bits, parts and relays flying. Now many Davids were out on the flat ground, away from the bunker. He fired again and again, moving slowly back, half-crouching and aiming. From the rise, Klaus fired down. The side of the rise was alive with claws making their way up. Hendricks retreated towards the rise, running and crouching. Tasso had left Klaus and was circling slowly to the right, moving away from the rise.

A David slipped up towards him, its small white face expressionless, brown hair hanging down in its eyes. It bent over suddenly, opening its arms. Its teddy bear hurtled down and leaped across the ground, bounding towards him. Hendricks fired. The bear and the David both dissolved. He grinned, blinking. It was like a dream.

“Up here!” Tasso’s voice. Hendricks made his way towards her. She was over by some columns of concrete, walls of a ruined building. She was firing past him, with the hand pistol Klaus had given her.

“Thanks.” He joined her, gasping for breath. She pulled him back, behind the concrete, fumbling at her belt. “Close your eyes!” She unfastened a globe from her waist. Rapidly, she unscrewed the cap, locking it into place. “Close your eyes and get down.”

She threw the bomb. It sailed in an arc, an expert, rolling and bouncing to the entrance of the bunker. Two Wounded Soldiers stood uncertainly by the brick pile. More Davids poured from behind them, out on to the plain. One of the Wounded Soldiers moved towards the bomb, stooping awkwardly down to pick it up.

The bomb went off. The concussion whirled Hendricks around, throwing him on his face. A hot wind rolled over him. Dimly he saw Tasso standing behind the columns, firing slowly and methodically at the Davids coming out of the raging clouds of white fire.

Back along the rise Klaus struggled with a ring of claws circling around him. He retreated, blasting at them and moving back, trying to break through the ring. Hendricks struggled to his feet. His head ached. He could hardly see. Everything was licking at him, raging and whirling. His right arm would not move.

Tasso pulled back toward him. “Come on. Let’s go.”

“Klaus — He’s still up there.”

“Come on!” Tasso dragged Hendricks back, away from the columns. Hendricks shook his head, trying to clear it. Tasso led him rapidly away, her eyes intense and bright, watching for claws that had escaped the blast. One David came out of the rolling clouds of flame. Tasso blasted it. No more appeared.

“But Klaus. What about him?” Hendricks stopped, standing unsteadily. “He —”

“Come on!”

They retreated, moving farther and farther away from the bunker. A few small claws followed them for a little while and then gave up, turning back and going off. At last Tasso stopped. “We can stop here and get our breaths.”

Hendricks sat down on some heaps of debris. He wiped his neck, gasping. “We left Klaus back there.” Tasso said nothing. She opened her gun, sliding a fresh round of blast cartridges into place.

Hendricks stared at her, dazed. “You left him back there on purpose.”

Tasso snapped the gun together. She studied the heaps of rubble around them, her face expressionless. As if she were watching for something.

“What is it?” Hendricks demanded. “What are you looking for? Is something coming?” He shook his head, trying to understand. What was she doing? What was she waiting for? He could see nothing. Ash lay all around them, ash and ruins. Occasional stark tree trunks, without leaves or branches. “What —”

Tasso cut him off. “Be still.” Her eyes narrowed. Suddenly her gun came up. Hendricks turned, following her gaze. Back the way they had come a figure appeared. The figure walked unsteadily toward them. Its clothes were torn. It limped as it made its way along, going very slowly and

carefully. Stopping now and then, resting and getting its strength. Once it almost fell. It stood for a moment, trying to steady itself. Then it came on.

Klaus.

Hendricks stood up. “Klaus!” He started towards him.

“How the hell did you —”

Tasso fired. Hendricks swung back. She fired again, the blast passing him, a searing line of heat. The beam caught Klaus in the chest. He exploded, gears and wheels flying. For a moment he continued to walk. Then he swayed back and forth. He crashed to the ground, his arms flung out. A few more wheels rolled away.

Silence.

Tasso turned to Hendricks. “Now you understand why he killed Rudi.”

Hendricks sat down again slowly. He shook his head. He was numb. He could not think.

“Do you see?” Tasso said. “Do you understand?”

Hendricks said nothing. Everything was slipping away from him, faster and faster. Darkness, rolling and plucking at him.

He closed his eyes.

Hendricks opened his eyes slowly. His body ached all over. He tried to sit up but needles of pain shot through his arm and shoulder. He gasped.

“Don’t try to get up,” Tasso said. She bent down, putting her cold hand against his forehead.

It was night. A few stars glinted above, shining through the drifting clouds of ash. Hendricks lay back, his teeth locked. Tasso watched him impassively. She had built a fire with some wood and weeds. The fire licked feebly, hissing at a metal cup suspended over it. Everything was silent. Unmoving darkness, beyond the fire.

"So he was the *Second Variety*," Hendricks murmured.

"I had always thought so."

"Why didn't you destroy him sooner?" he wanted to know.

"You held me back." Tasso crossed to the fire to look into the metal cup. "Coffee. It'll be ready to drink in a while."

She came back and sat down beside him. Presently she opened her pistol and began to disassemble the firing mechanism, studying it intently.

"This is a beautiful gun," Tasso said, half-aloud. "The construction is superb."

"What about them? The claws."

"The concussion from the bomb put most of them out of action. They're delicate. Highly organized, I suppose."

"The Davids, too?"

"Yes."

"How did you happen to have a bomb like that?"

Tasso shrugged. "We designed it. You shouldn't underestimate our technology, Major. Without such a bomb you and I would no longer exist."

“Very useful.”

Tasso stretched out her legs, warming her feet in the heat of the fire. “It surprised me that you did not seem to understand, after he killed Rudi. Why did you think he —”

“I told you. I thought he was afraid.”

“Really? You know, Major, for a little while I suspected you. Because you wouldn’t let me kill him. I thought you might be protecting him.” She laughed.

“Are we safe here?” Hendricks asked presently.

“For a while. Until they get reinforcements from some other area.” Tasso began to clean the interior of the gun with a bit of rag. She finished and pushed the mechanism back into place. She closed the gun, running her fingers along the barrel.

“We were lucky,” Hendricks murmured.

“Yes. Very lucky.”

“Thanks for pulling me away.”

Tasso did not answer. She glanced up at him, her eyes bright in the firelight. Hendricks examined his arm. He could not move his fingers. His whole side seemed numb. Down inside him was a dull steady ache.

“How do you feel?” Tasso asked.

“My arm is damaged.”

“Anything else?”

“Internal injuries.”

“You didn’t get down when the bomb went off.”

Hendricks said nothing. He watched Tasso pour the coffee from the cup into a flat metal pan. She brought it over to him.

“Thanks.” He struggled up enough to drink. It was hard to swallow. His insides turned over and he pushed the pan away. “That’s all I can drink now.”

Tasso drank the rest. Time passed. The clouds of ash moved across the dark sky above them. Hendricks rested, his mind blank. After a while he became aware that Tasso was standing over him, gazing down at him. “What is it?” he murmured.

“Do you feel any better?”

“Some.”

“You know, Major, if I hadn’t dragged you away they would have got you. You would be dead. Like Rudi.”

“I know.”

“Do you want to know why I brought you out? I could have left you. I could have left you there.”

“Why did you bring me out?”

“Because we have to get away from here.” Tasso stirred the fire with a stick, peering calmly down into it. “No human being can live here. When

their reinforcements come we won't have a chance. I've pondered about it while you were unconscious. We have perhaps three hours before they come."

"And you expect me to get us away?"

"That's right. I expect you to get us out of here."

"Why me?"

"Because I don't know any way." Her eyes shone at him in the half-light, bright and steady. "If you can't get us out of here they'll kill us within three hours. I see nothing else ahead. Well, Major? What are you going to do? I've been waiting all night. While you were unconscious I sat here, waiting and listening. It's almost dawn. The night is almost over."

Hendricks considered. "It's curious," he said at last.

"Curious?"

"That you should think I can get us out of here. I wonder what you think I can do."

"Can you get us to the Moon base?"

"The Moon base? How?"

"There must be some way."

Hendricks shook his head. "No. There's no way that I know of."

Tasso said nothing. For a moment her steady gaze wavered. She ducked her head, turning abruptly away. She scrambled to her feet. "More coffee?"

"No."

“Suit yourself.” Tasso drank silently. He could not see her face. He lay back against the ground, deep in thought, trying to concentrate. It was hard to think. His head still hurt. And the numbing daze still hung over him. “There might be one way,” he said suddenly.

“Oh?”

“How soon is dawn?”

“Two hours. The sun will be coming up shortly.”

“There’s supposed to be a ship near here. I’ve never seen it. But I know it exists.”

“What kind of a ship?” Her voice was sharp.

“A rocket cruiser.”

“Will it take us off? To the Moon base?”

“It’s supposed to. In case of emergency.” He rubbed his forehead.

“What’s wrong?”

“My head. It’s hard to think, can hardly — hardly concentrate. The bomb.”

“Is the ship near here?” Tasso slid over beside him, settling down on her haunches. “How far is it? Where is it?”

“I’m trying to think.”

Her fingers dug into his arm. “Nearby?” Her voice was like iron. “Where would it be? Would they store it underground? Hidden underground?”

“Yes. In a storage locker.”

“How do we find it? Is it marked? Is there a code marker to identify it?”

Hendricks concentrated. “No. No markings. No code symbol.”

“What, then?”

“A sign.”

“What sort of sign?”

Hendricks did not answer. In the flickering light his eyes were glazed, two sightless orbs. Tasso’s fingers dug into his arm.

“What sort of sign? What is it?”

“I can’t think. Let me rest.”

“All right.” She let go and stood up. Hendricks lay back against the ground, his eyes closed. Tasso walked away from him, her hands in her pockets. She kicked a rock out of her way and stood staring up at the sky. The night blackness was already beginning to fade into gray. Morning was coming.

Tasso gripped her pistol and walked around the fire in a circle, back and forth. On the ground Major Hendricks lay, his eyes closed, unmoving. The grayness rose in the sky, higher and higher. The landscape became visible, fields of ash stretching out in all directions. Ash and ruins of buildings, a wall here and there, heaps of concrete, the naked trunk of a tree.

The air was cold and sharp. Somewhere a long way off a bird made a few bleak sounds.

Hendricks stirred. He opened his eyes. “Is it dawn? Already?”

“Yes.”

Hendricks sat up a little. “You wanted to know something. You were asking me.”

“Do you remember now?”

“Yes.”

“What is it?” She tensed. “What?” she repeated sharply.

“A well. A ruined well. It’s in a storage locker under a well.”

“A well.” Tasso relaxed. “Then we’ll find a well.” She looked at her watch. “We have about an hour, Major. Do you think we can find it in an hour?”

“Give me a hand up,” Hendricks said.

Tasso put her pistol away and helped him to his feet.

“This is going to be difficult.”

“Yes it is.” Hendricks set his lips tightly. “I don’t think we’re going to go very far.”

They began to walk. The early sun cast a little warmth down on them. The land was flat and barren, stretching out gray and lifeless as far as they

could see. A few birds sailed silently, far above them, circling slowly. “See anything?” Hendricks said. “Any claws?”

“No. Not yet.”

They passed through some ruins, upright concrete and bricks. A cement foundation. Rats scuttled away. Tasso jumped back warily.

“This used to be a town,” Hendricks said. “A village. Provincial village. This was all grape country, once. Where we are now.”

They came on to a ruined street, weeds and cracks crisscrossing it. Over to the right a stone chimney stuck up. “Be careful,” he warned her.

A pit yawned, an open basement. Ragged ends of pipes jutted up, twisted and bent. They passed part of a house, a bathtub turned on its side. A broken chair. A few spoons and bits of china dishes. In the center of the street the ground had sunk away. The depression was filled with weeds and debris and bones.

“Over here,” Hendricks murmured.

“This way?”

“To the right.”

They passed the remains of a heavy-duty tank. Hendricks’ belt counter clicked ominously. The tank had been radiation blasted. A few feet from the tank a mummified body lay sprawled out, mouth open. Beyond the road was a flat field. Stones and weeds, and bits of broken glass. “There,” Hendricks said.

A stone well jutted up, sagging and broken. A few boards lay across it. Most of the well had sunk into rubble. Hendricks walked unsteadily toward it, Tasso beside him.

“Are you certain about this?” Tasso said. “This doesn’t look like anything.”

“I’m sure.” Hendricks sat down at the edge of the well, his teeth locked. His breath came quickly. He wiped perspiration from his face. “This was arranged so the senior command officer could get away. If anything happened. If the bunker fell.”

“That was you?”

“Yes.”

“Where is the ship? Is it here?”

“We’re standing on it.” Hendricks ran his hands over the surface of the well stones. “The eye-lock responds to me, not to anybody else. It’s my ship. Or it was supposed to be.” There was a sharp click. Presently they heard a low grating sound from below them.

“Step back,” Hendricks said. He and Tasso moved away from the well.

A section of the ground slid back. A metal frame pushed slowly up through the ash, shoving bricks and weeds out of the way. The action ceased, as the ship nosed into view. “There it is,” Hendricks said.

The ship was small. It rested quietly, suspended in its mesh frame, like a blunt needle. A rain of ash sifted down into the dark cavity from which the ship had been raised. Hendricks made his way over to it. He mounted the mesh and unscrewed the hatch, pulling it back. Inside the ship the control banks and the pressure seat were visible.

Tasso came and stood beside him, gazing into the ship. “I’m not accustomed to rocket piloting,” she said, after a while.

Hendricks glanced at her. “I’ll do the piloting.”

“Will you? There’s only one seat, Major. I can see it’s built to carry only a single person.”

Hendricks’ breathing changed. He studied the interior of the ship intently. Tasso was right. There was only one seat. The ship was built to carry only one person. “I see,” he said slowly. “And the one person is you.”

She nodded. “Of course.”

“Why?”

“You can’t go. You might not live through the trip. You’re injured. You probably wouldn’t get there.”

“An interesting point. But you see, I know where the Moon base is. And you don’t. You might fly around for months and not find it. It’s well hidden. Without knowing what to look for —”

“I’ll have to take my chances. Maybe I won’t find it. Not by myself. But I think you’ll give me all the information I need. Your life depends on it.”

“How?”

“If I find the Moon base in time, perhaps I can get them to send a ship back to pick you up. If I find the base in time. If not, then you haven’t a chance. I imagine there are supplies on the ship. They will last me long enough —”

Hendricks moved quickly. But his injured arm betrayed him. Tasso ducked, sliding lithely aside. Her hand came up, lightning fast. Hendricks saw the gun butt coming. He tried to ward off the blow, but she was too fast. The metal butt struck against the side of his head, just above his ear. Numbing pain rushed through him. Pain and rolling clouds of blackness. He

sank down, sliding to the ground. Dimly, he was aware that Tasso was standing over him, kicking him with her toe.

“Major! Wake up.”

He opened his eyes, groaning.

“Listen to me.” She bent down, the gun pointed to his face. “I have to hurry. There isn’t much time left. The ship is ready, but you must tell me the information I need before I leave.”

Hendricks shook his head, trying to clear it.

“Hurry up! Where is the Moon base? How do I find it? What do I look for?”

Hendricks said nothing.

“Answer me!”

“Sorry.”

“Major, the ship is loaded with provisions. I can coast for weeks. I’ll find the base eventually. And in a half hour you’ll be dead. Your only chance of survival —” She broke off.

Along the slope, by some crumbling ruins, something moved. Something in the ash. Tasso turned quickly, aiming. She fired. A puff of flame leaped. Something scuttled away, rolling across the ash. She fired again. The claw burst apart, wheels flying.

“See?” Tasso said. “A scout. It won’t be long.”

“You’ll bring them back here to get me?”

“Yes. As soon as possible.”

Hendricks looked up at her. He studied her intently. “You’re telling the truth?” A strange expression had come over his face, an avid hunger. “You will come back for me? You’ll get me to the Moon base?”

“I’ll get you to the Moon base. But tell me where it is! There’s only a little time left.”

“All right.” Hendricks picked up a piece of rock, pulling himself to a sitting position. “Watch.” Hendricks began to scratch in the ash. Tasso stood by him, watching the motion of the rock. Hendricks was sketching a crude lunar map.

“This is the Appenine Range. Here is the Crater of Archimedes. The Moon base is beyond the end of the Appenine, about two hundred miles. I don’t know exactly where. No one on Terra knows. But when you’re over the Appenine, signal with one red flare and a green flare, followed by two red flares in quick succession. The base monitor will record your signal. The base is under the surface, of course. They’ll guide you down with magnetic grapples.”

“And the controls? Can I operate them?”

“The controls are virtually automatic. All you have to do is give the right signal at the right time.”

“I will.”

“The seat absorbs most of the takeoff shock. Air and temperature are automatically controlled. The ship will leave Terra and pass out into free space. It’ll line itself up with the moon, falling into an orbit around it, about a hundred miles above the surface. The orbit will carry you over the base. When you’re in the region of the Appenine, release the signal rockets.”

Tasso slid into the ship and lowered herself into the pressure seat. The arm locks folded automatically around her. She fingered the controls. “Too bad you’re not going, Major. All this put here for you, and you can’t make the trip.”

“Leave me the pistol.”

Tasso pulled the pistol from her belt. She held it in her hand, weighing it thoughtfully. “Don’t go too far from this location. It’ll be hard to find you, as it is.”

“No. I’ll stay here by the well.”

Tasso gripped the takeoff switch, running her fingers over the smooth metal. “A beautiful ship, Major. Well built. I admire your workmanship. You people have always done good work. You build fine things. Your work, your creations, are your greatest achievement.”

“Give me the pistol,” Hendricks said impatiently, holding out his hand. He struggled to his feet.

“Goodbye, Major.” Tasso tossed the pistol past Hendricks. The pistol clattered and rolled away. Hendricks hurried after it. He bent down, snatching it up. The hatch of the ship clanged shut. The bolts fell into place. Hendricks made his way back. The inner door was being sealed. He raised the pistol unsteadily. There was a shattering roar. The ship burst up from its metal cage, fusing the mesh behind it. Hendricks cringed, pulling back. The ship shot up into the rolling clouds of ash, disappearing into the sky.

Hendricks stood watching a long time, until even the streamer had dissipated. Nothing stirred. The morning air was chill and silent. He began to walk aimlessly back the way they had come. Better to keep moving around. It would be a long time before help came — if it came at all. He

searched his pockets until he found a package of cigarettes. He lit one grimly. They had all wanted cigarettes from him. But cigarettes were scarce.

A lizard slithered by him, through the ash. He halted, rigid. The lizard disappeared. Above, the sun rose higher in the sky. Some flies landed on a flat rock to one side of him. Hendricks kicked at them with his foot. It was getting hot. Sweat trickled down his face, into his collar. His mouth was dry.

Presently he stopped walking and sat down on some debris. He unfastened his medicine kit and swallowed a few narcotic capsules. He looked around him. *Where was he?* Something lay ahead. Stretched out on the ground. Silent and unmoving.

Hendricks drew his gun quickly. It looked like a man. Then he remembered. It was the remain of Klaus. The *Second Variety*. Where Tasso had blasted him. He could see wheels and relays and metal parts, strewn around on the ash. Glittering and sparkling in the sunlight. Hendricks got to his feet and walked over. He nudged the inert form with his foot, turning it over a little. He could see the metal hull, the aluminum ribs and struts. More wiring fell out. Like viscera. Heaps of wiring, switches and relays. Endless motors and rods.

He bent down. The brain cage had been smashed by the fall. The artificial brain was visible. He gazed at it. A maze of circuits. Miniature tubes. Wires as fine as hair. He touched the brain cage. It swung aside. The type plate was visible. Hendricks studied the plate. And blanched.

IV-V.

For a long time he stared at the plate. *Fourth Variety*. Not the *Second*. They had been wrong. There were more types. Not just three. Many more, perhaps. At least four. And Klaus wasn’t the *Second Variety*.

Suddenly he tensed. Something was coming, walking through the ash beyond the hill. *What was it?* He strained to see. Figures. Figures coming

slowly along, making their way through the ash.

Coming towards him.

Hendricks crouched quickly, raising his gun. Sweat dripped down into his eyes. He fought down rising panic, as the figures neared.

The first was a David. The David saw him and increased its pace. The others hurried behind it. A second David. A third. Three Davids, all alike, coming toward him silently, without expression, their thin legs rising and falling. Clutching their teddy bears.

He aimed and fired. The first two Davids dissolved into particles. The third came on. And the figure behind it. Climbing silently towards him across the gray ash. A Wounded Soldier, towering over the David. And… And behind the Wounded Soldier came two Tassos, walking side by side. Heavy belt, Russian army pants, shirt, long hair. The familiar figure, as he had seen her only a little while before. Sitting in the pressure seat of the ship. Two slim, silent figures, both identical.

They were very near. The David bent down suddenly, dropping its teddy bear. The bear raced across the ground. Automatically, Hendricks' fingers tightened around the trigger. The bear was gone, dissolved into mist. The two Tasso Types moved on, expressionless, walking side by side, through the gray ash.

When they were almost to him, Hendricks raised the pistol waist high and fired.

The two Tassos dissolved. But already a new group was starting up the rise, five or six Tassos, all identical, a line of them coming rapidly towards him.

And he had given her the ship and the signal code. Because of him she was on her way to the moon, to the Moon base. He had made it possible.

He had been right about the bomb, after all. It had been designed with knowledge of the other types, the David Type and the Wounded Soldier Type. And the Klaus Type. Not designed by human beings. It had been designed by one of the underground factories, apart from all human contact. The line of Tassos came up to him. Hendricks braced himself, watching them calmly. The familiar face, the belt, the heavy shirt, the bomb carefully in place.

The bomb!

As the Tassos reached for him, a last ironic thought drifted through Hendricks' mind. He felt a little better, thinking about it. *The bomb*. Made by the *Second Variety* to destroy the other varieties. Made for that end alone.

They were already beginning to design weapons to use against each other.

Jon’s World

Kastner walked around the ship without speaking. He climbed the ramp and entered, disappearing cautiously inside. For a time his outline could be seen, stirring around. He appeared again, his broad face dimly alight.

“Well?” Caleb Ryan said. “What do you think?”

Kastner came down the ramp. “Is it ready to go? Nothing left to work out?”

“It’s almost ready. Workmen are finishing up the remaining sections. Relay connections and feed lines. But no major problems exist. None we can predict, at least.”

The two men stood together, looking up at the squat metal box with its ports and screens and observation grills. The ship was not lovely. There were no trim lines, no chrome and rexeroid struts to ease the hull into a gradually tapering teardrop. The ship was square and knobby, with turrets and projections rising up everywhere.

“What will they think when we emerge from that?” Kastner murmured.

“We had no time to beautify it. Of course, if you want to wait another two months —”

“Couldn’t you take off a few of the knobs? What are they for? What do they do?”

“Valves. You can examine the plans. They drain off the power load when it peaks too far up. Time travel is going to be dangerous. A vast load is collected as the ship moves back. It has to be leaked off gradually — or we’ll be an immense bomb charged with millions of volts.”

“I’ll take your word on it.” Kastner picked up his briefcase. He moved toward one of the exits. League Guards stepped out of his way. “I’ll tell the Directors it’s almost ready. By the way, I have something to reveal.”

“What is it?”

“We’ve decided who’s going along with you.”

“Who?”

“I’m going. I’ve always wanted to know what things were like before the war. You see the history spools, but it isn’t the same. I want to *be* there. Walk around. You know, they say there was no ash before the war. The surface was fertile. You could walk for miles without seeing ruins. This I would like to see.”

“I didn’t know you were interested in the past.”

“Oh, yes. My family preserved some illustrated books showing how it was. No wonder USIC wants to get hold of Schonerman’s papers. If reconstruction could begin —”

“That’s what we all want.”

“And maybe we’ll get it. I’ll see you later.”

Ryan watched the plump little businessman depart, his briefcase clutched tightly. The row of League Guards stepped aside for him to pass, filling in behind him as he disappeared through the doorway.

Ryan returned his attention to the ship. So Kastner was to be his companion. USIC — United Synthetic Industries Combine — had held out for equal representation on the trip. One man from the League, one from

USIC. USIC had been the source of supply, both commercial and financial, for Project Clock. Without its help the Project would never have got out of the paper stage. Ryan sat down at the bench and sent the blueprints racing through the scanner. They had worked a long time. There was not much left to be done. Only a few finishing touches here and there.

The vidscreen clicked. Ryan halted the scanner and swung to catch the call.

"Ryan."

The League monitor appeared on the screen. The call was coming through League cables. "Emergency call."

Ryan froze. "Put it through."

The monitor faded. After a moment an old face appeared, florid and lined. "Ryan —"

"What's happened?"

"You had better come home. As soon as you can."

"What is it?"

"Jon."

Ryan forced himself to be calm. "Another attack?" His voice was thick.

"Yes."

"Like the others?"

"Exactly like the others."

Ryan’s hand jerked to the cut-off switch. “All right. I’ll be home at once. Don’t let anyone in. Try to keep him quiet. Don’t let him out of his room. Double the guard, if necessary.”

Ryan broke the circuit. A moment later he was on his way to the roof, toward his intercity ship parked above him, at the roof field of the building.

His intercity ship rushed above the unending gray ash, automatic grapples guiding it toward City Four. Ryan stared blankly out the port, only half-seeing the sight below.

He was between cities. The surface was wasted, endless heaps of slag and ash as far as the eye could see. Cities rose up like occasional toadstools, separated by miles of gray. Toadstools here and there, towers and buildings, men and women working. Gradually the surface was being reclaimed. Supplies and equipment were being brought down from the Lunar Base.

During the war human beings had left Terra and gone to the Moon. Terra was devastated. Nothing but a globe of ruin and ash. Men had come back gradually, when the war was over.

Actually there had been two wars. The first was man against man. The second was man against the claws — complex robots that had been created as a war weapon. The claws had turned on their makers, designing their own new types and equipment.

Ryan’s ship began to descend. He was over City Four. Presently the ship came to rest on the roof of his massive private residence at the center of the city. Ryan leaped quickly out and crossed the roof to the lift.

A moment later he entered his quarters and made his way toward Jon’s room.

He found the old man watching Jon through the glass side of the room, his face grave. Jon's room was partly in darkness. Jon was sitting on the edge of his bed, his hands clasped tightly together. His eyes were shut. His mouth was open a little, and from time to time his tongue came out, stiff and rigid.

"How long has he been like that?" Ryan said to the old man beside him.

"About an hour."

"The other attacks followed the same pattern?"

"This is more severe. Each has been more severe."

"No one has seen him but you?"

"Just the two of us. I called you when I was certain. It's almost over. He's coming out of it."

On the other side of the glass Jon stood up and walked away from his bed, his arms folded. His blond hair hung down raggedly in his face. His eyes were still shut. His face was pale and set. His lips twitched.

"He was completely unconscious at first. I had left him alone for awhile. I was in another part of the building. When I came back I found him lying on the floor. He had been reading. The spools were scattered all around him. His face was blue. His breathing was irregular. There were repeated muscular spasms, as before."

"What did you do?"

"I entered the room and carried him to the bed. He was rigid at first, but after a few minutes he began to relax. His body became limp. I tested his pulse. It was very slow. Breathing was coming more easily. And then it began."

“It?”

“The talk.”

“Oh.” Ryan nodded.

“I wish you could have been here. He talked more than ever before. On and on. Streams of it. Without pause. As if he couldn’t stop.”

“Was — was it the same talk as before?”

“Exactly the same as it’s always been. And his face was lit up. Glowing. As before.”

Ryan considered. “Is it all right for me to go into the room?”

“Yes. It’s almost over.”

Ryan moved to the door. His fingers pressed against the code lock and the door slid back into the wall.

Jon did not notice him as he came quietly into the room. He paced back and forth, eyes shut, his arms wrapped around his body. He swayed a little, rocking from side to side. Ryan came to the center of the room and stopped.

“Jon!”

The boy blinked. His eyes opened. He shook his head rapidly. “Ryan? What — what did you want?”

“Better sit down.”

Jon nodded. “Yes. Thank you.” He sat down on the bed uncertainly. His eyes were wide and blue. He pushed his hair back out of his face, smiling a little at Ryan.

“How do you feel?”

“I feel all right.”

Ryan sat down across from him, drawing a chair over. He crossed his legs, leaning back. For a long time he studied the boy. Neither of them spoke. “Grant says you had a little attack,” Ryan said finally.

Jon nodded.

“You’re over it now?”

“Oh, yes. How is the time ship coming?”

“Fine.”

“You promised I could see it, when it’s ready.”

“You can. When it’s completely done.”

“When will that be?”

“Soon. A few more days.”

“I want to see it very much. I’ve been thinking about it. Imagine going into time. You could go back to Greece. You could go back and see Pericles and Xenophon and — and Epictetus. You could go back to Egypt and talk to Ikhnaton.” He grinned. “I can’t wait to see it.”

Ryan shifted. “Jon, do you really think you’re well enough to go outside? Maybe —”

“Well enough? What do you mean?”

“Your attacks. You really think you should go out? Are you strong enough?”

Jon’s face clouded. “They’re not attacks. Not really. I wish you wouldn’t call them attacks.”

“Not attacks? What are they?”

Jon hesitated. “I — I shouldn’t tell you, Ryan. You wouldn’t understand.”

Ryan stood up. “All right, Jon. If you feel you can’t talk to me I’ll go back to the lab.” He crossed the room to the door. “It’s a shame you can’t see the ship. I think you’d like it.”

Jon followed him plaintively. “Can’t I see it?”

“Maybe if I knew more about your — your attacks I’d know whether you’re well enough to go out.”

Jon’s face flickered. Ryan watched him intently. He could see thoughts crossing Jon’s mind, written on his features. He struggled inwardly.

“Don’t you want to tell me?”

Jon took a deep breath. “They’re *visions.*”

“What?”

“They’re visions.” Jon’s face was alive with radiance. “I’ve known it a long time. Grant says they’re not, but they are. If you could see them you’d

know, too. They're not like anything else. More real than, well, than this." He thumped the wall. "More real than that."

Ryan lit a cigarette slowly. "Go on."

It all came with a rush. "More real than *anything* else! Like looking through a window. A window into another world. A real world. Much more real than this. It makes all this just a shadow world. Only dim shadows. Shapes. Images."

"Shadows of an ultimate reality?"

"Yes! Exactly. The world behind all this." Jon paced back and forth, animated by excitement. "This, all these things. What we see here. Buildings. The sky. The cities. The endless ash. None is quite real. It's so dim and vague! I don't really feel it, not like the other. And it's becoming less real, all the time. The other is growing, Ryan. Growing more and more vivid! Grant told me it's only my imagination. But it's not. It's real. More real than any of these things here, these things in this room."

"Then why can't we all see it?"

"I don't know. I wish you could. You ought to see it, Ryan. It's beautiful. You'd like it, after you got used to it. It takes time to adjust."

Ryan considered. "Tell me," he said at last. "I want to know exactly what you see. Do you always see the same thing?"

"Yes. Always the same. But more intensely."

"What is it? What do you see that's so real?"

Jon did not answer for awhile. He seemed to have withdrawn. Ryan waited, watching his son. What was going on in his mind? What was he

thinking? The boy's eyes were shut again. His hands were pressed together, the fingers white. He was off again, off in his private world.

"Go on," Ryan said aloud.

So it was *visions* the boy saw. Visions of ultimate reality. Like the Middle Ages. His own son. There was a grim irony in it. Just when it seemed they had finally licked that proclivity in man, his eternal inability to face reality. His eternal dreaming. Would science never be able to realize its ideal? Would man always go on preferring illusion to reality?

His own son. Retrogression. A thousand years lost. Ghosts and gods and devils and the secret inner world. The world of ultimate reality. All the fables and fictions and metaphysics that man had used for centuries to compensate for his fear, his terror of the world. All the dreams he had made up to hide the truth, the harsh world of reality. Myths, religions, fairy tales. A better land, beyond and above. Paradise. All coming back, reappearing again, and in his own son.

"Go on," Ryan said impatiently. "What do you see?"

"I see fields," Jon said. "Yellow fields as bright as the sun. Fields and parks. Endless parks. Green, mixed in with the yellow. Paths, for people to walk."

"What else?"

"Men and women. In robes. Walking along the paths, among the trees. The air fresh and sweet. The sky bright blue. Birds. Animals. Animals moving through the parks. Butterflies. Oceans. Lapping oceans of clear water."

"No cities?"

“Not like our cities. Not the same. People living in the parks. Little wood houses here and there. Among the trees.”

“Roads?”

“Only paths. No ships or anything. Only walking.”

“What else do you see?”

“That’s all.” Jon opened his eyes. His cheeks were flushed. His eyes sparkled and danced. “That’s all, Ryan. Parks and yellow fields. Men and women in robes. And so many animals. The wonderful animals.”

“How do they live?”

“What?”

“How do the people live? What keeps them alive?”

“They grow things. In the fields.”

“Is that all? Don’t they build? Don’t they have factories?”

“I don’t think so.”

“An agrarian society. Primitive.” Ryan frowned. “No business or commerce.”

“They work in the fields. And discuss things.”

“Can you *hear* them?”

“Very faintly. Sometimes I can hear them a little, if I listen very hard. I can’t make out any words, though.”

“What are they discussing?”

“Things.”

“What kind of things?”

Jon gestured vaguely. “Great things. The world. The universe.”

There was silence. Ryan grunted. He did not say anything. Finally he put out his cigarette. “Jon —”

“Yes?”

“You think what you see is *real?*”

Jon smiled. “I know it’s real.”

Ryan’s gaze was sharp. “What do you mean, real? In what way is this world of yours real?”

“It exists.”

“Where does it exist?”

“I don’t know.”

“Here? Does it exist here?”

“No. It’s not here.”

“Some place else? A long way off? Some other part of the universe beyond our range of experience?”

“Not another part of the universe. It has nothing to do with space. It’s here.” Jon waved around him. “Close by. It’s very close. I see it all around me.”

“Do you see it now?”

“No. It comes and goes.”

“It ceases to exist? It only exists sometimes?”

“No, it’s always there. But I can’t always make contact with it.”

“How do you know it’s always there?”

“I just know.”

“Why can’t *I* see it? Why are you the only one who can see it?”

“I don’t know.” Jon rubbed his forehead wearily. “I don’t know why I’m the only one who can see it. I wish you could see it. I wish everybody could see it.”

“How can you demonstrate it isn’t an hallucination? You have no objective validation of it. You have only your own inner sense, your state of consciousness. How could it be presented for empirical analysis?”

“Maybe it can’t. I don’t know. I don’t care. I don’t *want* to present it for empirical analysis.”

There was silence. Jon’s face was set and grim, his jaw tight. Ryan sighed. Impasse.

“All right, Jon.” He moved slowly toward the door. I’ll see you later.”

Jon said nothing.

At the door Ryan halted, looking back. “Then your visions are getting stronger, aren’t they? Progressively more vivid.”

Jon nodded curtly.

Ryan considered awhile. Finally he raised his hand. The door slid away and he passed outside the room, into the hall.

Grant came up to him. “I was watching through the window. He’s quite withdrawn, isn’t he?”

“It’s difficult to talk to him. He seems to believe these attacks are some kind of vision.”

“I know. He’s told me.”

“Why didn’t you let me know?”

“I didn’t want to alarm you more. I know you’ve been worried about him.”

“The attacks are getting worse. He says they’re more vivid. More convincing.”

Grant nodded.

Ryan moved along the corridor, deep in thought, Grant a little behind. “It’s difficult to be certain of the best course of action. The attacks absorb him more and more. He’s beginning to take them seriously. They’re usurping the place of the outside world. And in addition —”

“And in addition you’re leaving soon.”

“I wish we knew more about time travel. A great number of things may happen to us.” Ryan rubbed his jaw. “We might not come back. Time is a potent force. No real exploration has been done. We have no idea what we may run into.”

He came to the lift and stopped.

“I’ll have to make my decision right away. It has to be made before we leave.”

“Your decision?”

Ryan entered the lift. “You’ll know about it later. Watch Jon constantly from now on. Don’t be away from him for even a moment. Do you understand?”

Grant nodded. “I understand. You want to be sure he doesn’t leave his room.”

“You’ll hear from me either tonight or tomorrow.” Ryan ascended to the roof and entered his intercity ship.

As soon as he was in the sky he clicked on the vidscreen and dialed the League Offices. The face of the League Monitor appeared. “Offices.”

“Give me the medical center.”

The monitor faded. Presently Walter Timmer, the medical director, appeared on the screen. His eyes flickered as he recognized Ryan. “What can I do for you, Caleb?”

“I want you to get out a medical car and a few good men and come over here to City Four.”

“Why?”

“It’s a matter I discussed with you several months ago. You recall, I think.”

Timmer’s expression changed. “Your son?”

“I’ve decided. I can’t wait any longer. He’s getting worse, and we’ll be leaving soon on the time trip. I want it performed before I leave.”

“All right.” Timmer made a note. “We’ll make immediate arrangements here. And we’ll send a ship over to pick him up at once.”

Ryan hesitated. “You’ll do a good job?”

“Of course. We’ll have James Pryor perform the actual operation.” Timmer reached up to cut the vidscreen circuit. “Don’t worry, Caleb. He’ll do a good job. Pryor is the best lobotomist the center has.”

Ryan laid out the map, stretching the corners flat against the table. “This is a time map, drawn up in the form of a space projection. So we can see where we’re going.”

Kastner peered over his shoulder. “Will we be confined to the one Project — getting Schonerman’s papers? Or can we move around?”

“Only the one Project is contemplated. But to be certain of success we should make several stops on this side of Schonerman’s continuum. Our time map may be inaccurate, or the drive itself may act with some bias.”

The work was finished. All the final sections were put in place.

In a corner of the room Jon sat watching, his face expressionless. Ryan glanced toward him. “How does it look to you?”

“Fine.”

The time ship was like some stubby insect, overgrown with warts and knobs. A square box with windows and endless turrets. Not really a ship at all.

“I guess you wish you could come,” Kastner said to Jon. “Right?”

Jon nodded faintly.

“How are you feeling?” Ryan asked him.

“Fine.”

Ryan studied his son. The boy’s color had come back. He had regained most of his original vitality. The visions, of course, no longer existed.

“Maybe you can come next time,” Kastner said.

Ryan returned to the map. “Schonerman did most of his work between 2030 and 2037. The results were not put to any use until several years later. The decision to use his work in the war was reached only after long consideration. The Government seemed to have been aware of the dangers.”

“But not sufficiently so.”

“No.” Ryan hesitated. “And we may be getting ourselves into the same situation.”

“How do you mean?”

“Schonerman’s discovery of the artificial brain was lost when the last claw was destroyed. None of us have been able to duplicate his work. If we

bring his papers we may put society back in jeopardy. We may bring back the claws.”

Kastner shook his head. “No. Schonerman’s work was not implicitly related to the claws. The development of an artificial brain does not imply lethal usage. Any scientific discovery can be used for destruction. Even the wheel was used in the Assyrian war chariots.”

“I suppose so.” Ryan glanced up at Kastner. “Are you certain USIC doesn’t intend to use Schonerman’s work along military lines?”

“USIC is an industrial combine. Not a government.”

“It would ensure its advantage for a long time.”

“USIC is strong enough as it is.”

“Let it go.” Ryan rolled up the map. “We can start any minute. I’m anxious to get going. We’ve worked a long time on this.”

“I agree.”

Ryan crossed the room to his son. “We’re leaving, Jon. We should be back fairly soon. Wish us luck.”

Jon nodded. “I wish you luck.”

“You’re feeling all right?”

“Yes.”

“Jon — you feel better now, don’t you? Better than before?”

“Yes.”

“Aren’t you glad they’re gone? All the troubles you were having?”

“Yes.”

Ryan put his hand awkwardly on the boy’s shoulder. “We’ll see you later.”

Ryan and Kastner made their way up the ramp to the hatch of the time ship. From the corner, Jon watched them silently. A few League Guards lounged at the entrances to the work lab, watching with idle interest.

Ryan paused at the hatch. He called one of the guards over. “Tell Timmer I want him.”

The guard went off, pushing through the exit.

“What is it?” Kastner said.

“I have some final instructions to give him.”

Kastner shot him a sharp glance. “Final? What’s the matter? You think something’s going to happen to us?”

“No. Just a precaution.”

Timmer came striding in. “You’re leaving, Ryan?”

“Everything’s ready. There’s no reason to hold back any longer.”

Timmer came up the ramp. “What did you want me for?”

“This may be unnecessary. But there’s always the possibility something might go wrong. In case the ship doesn’t reappear according to schedule

I’ve filed with the League members —”

“You want me to name a protector for Jon.”

“That’s right.”

“There’s nothing to worry about.”

“I know. But I’d feel better. Someone should watch out for him.”

They both glanced at the silent, expressionless boy sitting in the corner of the room. Jon stared straight ahead. His face was blank. His eyes were dull, listless. There was nothing there.

“Good luck,” Timmer said. He and Ryan shook hands. “I hope everything works out.”

Kastner climbed inside the ship, setting down his briefcase. Ryan followed him, lowering the hatch into place and bolting it into position. He sealed the inner lock. A bank of automatic lighting came on. Controlled atmosphere began to hiss into the cabin of the ship.

“Air, light, heat,” Kastner said. He peered out the port at the League Guards outside. “It’s hard to believe. In a few minutes all this will disappear. This building. These guards. Everything.”

Ryan seated himself at the control board of the ship, spreading out the time map. He fastened the map into position, crossing the surface with the cable leads from the board before him. “It’s my plan to make several observation stops along the way, so we can view some of the past events relevant to our work.”

“The war?”

“Mainly. I’m interested in seeing the claws in actual operation. At one time they were in complete control of Terra, according to the War Office records.”

“Let’s not get too close, Ryan.”

Ryan laughed. “We won’t land. We’ll make our observations from the air. The only actual contact we’ll make will be with Schonerman.”

Ryan closed the power circuit. Energy flowed through the ship around them, flooding into the meters and indicators on the control board. Needles jumped, registering the load.

“The main thing we have to watch is our energy peak,” Ryan explained. “If we build up to much of a load of time ergs the ship won’t be able to come out of the time stream. We’ll keep moving back into the past, building up a greater and greater charge.”

“An enormous bomb.”

“That’s right.” Ryan adjusted the switches before him. The meter readings changed. “Here we go. Better hang on.”

He released the controls. The ship shuddered as it polarized into position, easing into the time flow. The vanes and knobs changed their settings, adjusting themselves to the stress. Relays closed, braking the ship against the current sweeping around them.

“Like the ocean,” Ryan murmured. “The most potent energy in the universe. The great dynamic behind all motion. The Prime Mover.”

“Maybe this is what they used to mean by God.”

Ryan nodded. The ship was vibrating around them. They were in the grip of a giant hand, an immense fist closing silently. They were in motion.

Through the port the men and walls had begun to waver, fading out of existence as the ship slipped out of phase with the present, drifting farther and farther into the flow of the time stream.

“It won’t be long,” Ryan murmured.

All at once the scene beyond the port winked out. There was nothing there. Nothing beyond them.

“We’ve not phased with any space-time objects,” Ryan explained. “We’re out of focus with the universe itself. At this moment we exist in non-time. There’s no continuum in which we’re operating.”

“I hope we can get back again.” Kastner sat down nervously, his eyes on the blank port. “I feel like the first man who went down in a submarine.”

“That was during the American Revolution. The submarine was propelled by a crank which the pilot turned. The other end of the crank was a propeller.”

“How could he go very far?”

“He didn’t. He cranked his ship under a British frigate and then bored a hole in the frigate’s hull.”

Kastner glanced up at the hull of the time ship, vibrating and rattling from stress. “What would happen if this ship should break open?”

“We’d be atomized. Dissolved into the stream around us.” Ryan lit a cigarette. “We’d become a part of the time flow. We’d move back and forth endlessly, from one end of the universe to the other.”

“End?”

“The time ends. Time flows both ways. Right now we’re moving back. But energy must move both ways to keep a balance. Otherwise time ergs in vast amounts would collect at one particular continuum and the result would be catastrophic.”

“Do you suppose there’s some purpose behind all of this? I wonder how the time flow ever got started.”

“Your question is meaningless. Questions of purpose have no objective validity. They can’t be subjected to any form of empirical investigation.”

Kastner lapsed into silence. He picked at his sleeve nervously, watching the port.

Across the time map the cable arms moved, tracing a line from the present back into the past. Ryan studied the motion of the arms. “We’re reaching the latter part of the war. The final stages. I’m going to rephase the ship and bring it out of the time flow.”

“Then we’ll be back in the universe again?”

“Among objects. In a specific continuum.”

Ryan gripped the power switch. He took a deep breath. The first great test of the ship had passed. They had entered the time stream without accident. Could they leave it as easily? He opened the switch.

The ship leaped. Kastner staggered, catching hold of the wall support. Outside the port a gray sky twisted and wavered. Adjustments fell into place, leveling the ship in the air. Down below them Terra circled and tilted as the ship gained equilibrium.

Kastner hurried to the port to peer out. They were a few hundred feet above the surface, rushing parallel to the ground. Gray ash stretched out in

all directions, broken by the occasional mounds of rubbish. Ruins of towns, buildings, walls. Wrecks of military equipment. Clouds of ash blew across the sky, darkening the sun.

“Is the war still on?” Kastner asked.

“The claws still possess Terra. We should be able to see them.”

Ryan raised the time ship, increasing the scope of their view. Kastner scanned the ground. “What if they fire at us?”

“We can always escape into time.”

“They might capture the ship and use it to come to the present.”

“I doubt it. At this stage in the war the claws were busy fighting among themselves.”

To their right ran a winding road, disappearing into the ash and reappearing again later on. Bomb craters gaped here and there, breaking the road up. Something was coming slowly along it.

“There,” Kastner said. “On the road. A column of some sort.”

Ryan maneuvered the ship. They hung above the road, the two of them peering out. The column was dark brown, a marching file making its way steadily along. Men, a column of men, marching silently through the landscape of ash.

Suddenly Kastner gasped. “They’re identical! All of them are the same!”

They were seeing a column of claws. Like lead toys, the robots marched along, tramping through the gray ash. Ryan caught his breath. He had expected such a sight, of course. There were only four types of claws.

These he saw now had all been turned out in the same underground plant, from the same dies and stampers. Fifty or sixty robots, shaped like young men, marched calmly along. They moved very slowly. Each had only one leg.

"They must have been fighting among themselves," Kastner murmured.

"No. This type was made this way. The Wounded Soldier Type. Originally they were designed to trick human sentries to gain entrance into regular bunkers."

It was weird, watching the silent column of men, identical men, each the same as the next, plodding along the road. Each soldier supported himself with a crutch. Even the crutches were identical. Kastner opened and closed his mouth in revulsion.

"Not very pleasant, is it?" Ryan said. "We're lucky the human race got away to Luna."

"Didn't any of these follow?"

"A few, but by that time we had identified the four types and were ready for them." Ryan took hold of the power switch. "Let's go on."

"Wait." Kastner raised his hand. "Something's going to happen."

To the right of the road a group of figures were slipping rapidly down the side of a rise, through the ash. Ryan let go of the power switch, watching. The figures were identical. Women. The women, in uniforms and boots, advanced quietly toward the column on the road.

"Another variety," Kastner said.

Suddenly the column of soldiers halted. They scattered, hobbling awkwardly in all directions. Some of them fell, stumbling and dropping

their crutches. The women rushed out on the road. They were slender and young, with dark hair and eyes. One of the Wounded Soldiers began to fire. A woman fumbled at her belt. She made a throwing motion.

"What —" Kastner muttered. There was a sudden flash. A cloud of white light rose from the center of the road, billowing in all directions.

"Some kind of concussion bomb," Ryan said.

"Maybe we better get out of here."

Ryan threw the switch. The scene below them began to waver. Abruptly it faded. It winked out.

"Thank God that's over," Kastner said. "So that's what the war was like."

"The second part. The major part. Claw against claw. It's a good thing they started fighting with each other. Good for us, I mean."

"Where to now?"

"We'll make one more observation stop. During the early part of the war. Before claws came into use."

"And then Schonerman?"

Ryan set his jaw. "That's right. One more stop and then Schonerman."

Ryan adjusted the controls. The meters moved slightly. Across the map the cable arm traced their path. "It won't be long," Ryan murmured. He gripped the switch, setting the relays in place. "This time we have to be more careful. There'll be more war activity."

“Maybe we shouldn’t even —”

“I want to see. This was man against man. The Soviet region against the United Nations. I’m curious to see what it was like.”

“What if we’re spotted?”

“We can get away quickly.”

Kastner said nothing. Ryan manipulated the controls. Time passed. At the edge of the board Ryan’s cigarette burned to an ash. At last he straightened up.

“Here we go. Get set.” He opened the switch.

Below them green and brown plains stretched out, pocked with bomb craters. Part of a city swept past. It was burning. Towering columns of smoke rose up, drifting into the sky. Along the roads black dots moved, vehicles and people streaming away.

“A bombing,” Kastner said. “Recent.”

The city fell behind. They were over open country. Military trucks rushed along. Most of the land was still intact. They could see a few farmers working the fields. The farmers dropped down as the time ship moved over them.

Ryan studied the sky. “Watch out.”

“Air craft?”

“I’m not sure where we are. I don’t know the location of the sides in this part of the war. We may be over UN territory, or Soviet territory.” Ryan held on tight to the switch.

From the blue sky two dots appeared. The dots grew. Ryan watched them intently. Beside him Kastner gave a nervous grunt. “Ryan, we better __”

The dots separated. Ryan’s hand closed over the power switch. He yanked it closed. As the scene dissolved the dots swept past. Then there was nothing but grayness outside.

In their ears the roar of the two planes still echoed.

“That was close,” Kastner said.

“Very. They didn’t waste any time.”

“I hope you don’t want to stop any more.”

“No. No more observation stops. The Project itself comes next. We’re close to Schonerman’s time area. I can begin to slow down the velocity of the ship. This is going to be critical.”

“Critical?”

“There are going to be problems getting to Schonerman. We must hit his continuum exactly, both in space as well as time. He may be guarded. In any case they won’t give us much time to explain who we are.” Ryan tapped the time map. “And there’s always the chance the information given here is incorrect.”

“How long before we rephase with a continuum? Schonerman’s continuum?”

Ryan looked at his wristwatch. “About five or ten minutes. Get ready to leave the ship. Part of this is going to be on foot.”

It was night. There was no sound, only unending silence. Kastner strained to hear, his ear against the hull of the ship. “Nothing.”

“No. I don’t hear anything either.” Carefully, Ryan unbolted the hatch, sliding the locks back. He pushed the hatch open, his gun gripped tight. He peered out into the darkness.

The air was fresh and cold. Full of smells of growing things. Trees and flowers. He took a deep breath. He could see nothing. It was pitch black. Far off, a long way off, a cricket chirruped.

“Hear that?” Ryan said.

“What is it?”

“A beetle.” Ryan stepped gingerly down. The ground was soft underfoot. He was beginning to adjust to the darkness. Above him a few stars glinted. He could make out trees, a field of trees. And beyond the trees a high fence.

Kastner stepped down beside him. “What now?”

“Keep your voice down.” Ryan indicated the fence. “We’re going that way. Some kind of building.”

They crossed the field to the fence. At the fence Ryan aimed his gun, setting the charge at minimum. The fence charred and sank, the wire glowed red.

Ryan and Kastner stepped over the fence. The side of the building rose, concrete and iron. Ryan nodded to Kastner. “We’ll have to move quickly. And low.”

He crouched, taking a breath. Then he ran, bent over, Kastner beside him. They crossed the ground to the building. A window loomed up in front

of them. Then a door. Ryan threw his weight against the door.

The door opened. Ryan fell inside, staggering. He caught a quick glimpse of startled faces, men leaping to their feet.

Ryan fired, sweeping the interior of the room with his gun. Flame rushed out, crackling around him. Kastner fired past his shoulder. Shapes moved in the flame, dim outlines falling and rolling.

The flames died. Ryan advanced, stepping over charred heaps on the floor. A barracks. Bunks, remains of a table. An overturned lamp and radio.

By the rays of the lamp Ryan studied a battle map pinned on the wall. He traced the map with his fingers, deep in thought.

“Are we far?” Kastner asked, standing by the door with his gun ready.

“No. Only a few miles.”

“How do we get there?”

“We’ll move the time ship. It’s safer. We’re lucky. It might have been on the other side of the world.”

“Will there be many guards?”

“I’ll tell you the facts when we get there.” Ryan moved to the door. “Come on. Someone may have seen us.”

Kastner grabbed up a handful of newspapers from the remains of the table. “I’ll bring these. Maybe they’ll tell us something.”

“Good idea.”

Ryan set the ship down in a hollow between two hills. He spread the newspapers out, studying them intently. “We’re earlier than I thought. By a few months. Assuming these are new.” He fingered the newsprint. “Not turned yellow. Probably only a day or so old.”

“What is the date?”

“Autumn, 2030. September 21.”

Kastner peered out the port. “The sun is going to be coming up soon. The sky is beginning to turn gray.”

“We’ll have to work fast.”

“I’m a little uncertain. What am I supposed to do?”

“Schonerman is in a small village beyond this hill. We’re in the United States. In Kansas. This area is surrounded by troops, a circle of pillboxes and dugouts. We’re inside the periphery. Schonerman is virtually unknown at this continuum. His research has never been published. At this time he’s working as part of a large Government research project.”

“Then he’s not especially protected.”

“Only later on, when his work has been turned over to the Government will he be protected day and night. Kept in an underground laboratory and never let up to the surface. The Government’s most valuable research worker. But right now —”

“How will we know him?”

Ryan handed Kastner a sheaf of photographs. “This is Schonerman. All the pictures that survived up to our own time.”

Kastner studied the pictures. Schonerman was a small man with horn-rimmed glasses. He smiled feebly at the camera, a thin nervous man with a prominent forehead. His hands were slender, the fingers long and tapered. In one photograph he sat at his desk, a pipe beside him, his thin chest covered by a sleeveless wool sweater. In another he sat with his legs crossed, a tabby cat in his lap, a mug of beer in front of him. An old German enamel mug with hunting scenes and Gothic letters.

“So that’s the man who invented the claws. Or did the research work.”

“That’s the man who worked out the principles for the first workable artificial brain.”

“Did he know they were going to use his work to make the claws?”

“Not at first. According to reports, Schonerman first learned about it only when the initial batch of claws was released. The United Nations were losing the war. The Soviets gained an original advantage, due to their opening surprise attacks. The claws were hailed as a triumph of Western development. For a time they seemed to have turned the tide of the war.”

“And then —”

“And then the claws began to manufacture their own varieties and attack Soviets and Westerners alike. The only humans that survived were those at the UN base on Luna. A few dozen million.”

“It was a good thing the claws finally turned on each other.”

“Schonerman saw the whole development of his work to the last stages. They say he became greatly embittered.”

Kastner passed the pictures back. “And you say he’s not especially well guarded?”

“Not at this continuum. No more than any other research worker. He’s young. In this continuum he’s only twenty-five. Remember that.”

“Where’ll we find him?”

“The Government Project is located in what was once a school house. Most of the work is done on the surface. No big underground development has begun yet. The research workers have barracks about a quarter mile from their labs.” Ryan glanced at his watch. “Our best chance is to nab him as he begins work at his bench in the lab.”

“Not in the barracks?” .

“The papers are all in the lab. The Government doesn’t allow any written work to be taken out. Each worker is searched as he leaves.” Ryan touched his coat gingerly. “We have to be careful. Schonerman must not be harmed. We only want his papers.”

“We won’t use our blasters?”

“No. We don’t dare take the chance of injuring him.”

“His papers will definitely be at his bench?”

“He’s not allowed to remove them for any reason. We know exactly where we’ll find what we want. There’s only one place the papers can be.”

“Their security precautions play right into our hands.”

“Exactly,” Ryan murmured.

Ryan and Kastner slipped down the hillside, running between the trees. The ground was hard and cold underfoot. They emerged at the edge of the town. A few people were already up, moving slowly along the street. The town had not been bombed. There was no damage, as yet. The windows of

the stores had been boarded up and huge arrows pointed to the underground shelters.

“What do they have on?” Kastner said. “Some of them have something on their faces.”

“Bacteria masks. Come on.” Ryan gripped his blast pistol as he and Kastner made their way through the town. None of the people paid any attention to them.

“Just two more uniformed people,” Kastner said.

“Our main hope is surprise. We’re inside the wall of defense. The sky is patrolled against Soviet craft. No Soviet agents could be landed here. And in any case, this is a minor research lab, in the center of the United States. There would be no reason for Soviet agents to come here.”

“But there will be guards.”

“Everything is guarded. All science. All kinds of research work.”

The school house loomed up ahead of them. A few men were milling around the doorway. Ryan’s heart constricted. Was Schonerman one of them?

The men were going inside, one by one. A guard in helmet and uniform was checking their badges. A few of the men wore bacteria masks, only their eyes visible. Would he recognize Schonerman? What if he wore a mask? Fear gripped Ryan suddenly. In a mask Schonerman would look like anyone else.

Ryan slipped his blast pistol away, motioning Kastner to do the same. His fingers closed over the lining of his coat pocket.

Sleep-gas crystals. No one this early would have been immunized against sleep-gas. It had not been developed until a year or so later. The gas would put everyone for several hundred feet around into varying periods of sleep. It was a tricky and unpredictable weapon — but perfect for this situation.

"I'm ready," Kastner murmured.

"Wait. We have to wait for *him.*"

They waited. The sun rose, warming the cold sky. More research workers appeared, filing up the path and inside the building. They puffed white clouds of frozen moisture and slapped their hands together. Ryan began to become nervous. One of the guards was watching him and Kastner. If they became suspicious —

A small man in a heavy overcoat and horn-rimmed glasses came up the path, hurrying toward the building.

Ryan tensed. Schonerman! Schonerman flashed his badge to the guard. He stamped his feet and went inside the building, stripping off his mittens. It was over in a second. A brisk young man, hurrying to get to his work. To his papers.

"Come on," Ryan said.

He and Kastner moved forward. Ryan pulled the gas crystals loose from the lining of his pocket. The crystals were cold and hard in his hand. Like diamonds. The guard was watching them coming, his gun alert. His face was set. Studying them. He had never seen them before. Ryan, watching the guard's face, could read his thoughts without trouble.

Ryan and Kastner halted at the doorway. "We're from the FBI," Ryan said calmly.

“Identify yourselves.” The guard did not move.

“Here are our credentials,” Ryan said. He drew his hand out from his coat pocket. And crushed the gas crystals in his fist.

The guard sagged. His face relaxed. Limply, his body slid to the ground. The gas spread. Kastner stepped through the door, peering around, his eyes bright.

The building was small. Lab benches and equipment stretched out on all sides of them. The workers lay where they had been standing, inert heaps on the floor, their arms and legs out, their mouths open.

“Quick.” Ryan passed Kastner, hurrying across the lab. At the far fend of the room Schonerman lay slumped over his bench, his head resting against the metal surface. His glasses had fallen off. His eyes were open, staring. He had taken his papers out of the drawer. The padlock and key were still on the bench. The papers were under his head and between his hands.

Kastner ran to Schonerman and snatched the papers up, stuffing them into his briefcase.

“Get them all!”

“I have them all.” Kastner pulled open the drawer. He grabbed the remaining papers in the drawer. “Every one of them.”

“Let’s go. The gas will dissipate rapidly.”

They ran back outside. A few sprawled bodies lay across the entrance, workers who had come into the area.

“Hurry.”

They ran through the town, along the single main street. People gaped at them in astonishment. Kastner gasped for breath, holding on tight to his briefcase as he ran. “I’m — winded.”

“Don’t stop.”

They reached the edge of the town and started up the hillside. Ryan ran between the trees, his body bent forward, not looking back. Some of the workers would be reviving. And other guards would be coming into the area. It would not be long before the alarm would be out.

Behind them a siren whirred into life.

“Here they come.” Ryan paused at the top of the hill, waiting for Kastner. Behind them men were swelling rapidly into the street, coming up out of the underground bunkers. More sirens wailed, a dismal echoing sound.

“Down!” Ryan ran down the hillside toward the time ship, sliding and slipping on the dry earth. Kastner hurried after him, sobbing for breath. They could hear orders being shouted. Soldiers swarming up the hillside after them.

Ryan reached the ship. He grabbed Kastner and pulled him inside. “Get the hatch shut. Get it closed!”

Ryan ran to the control board. Kastner dropped his briefcase and tugged at the rim of the hatch. At the top of the hill a line of soldiers appeared. They made their way down the hillside, aiming and firing as they ran.

“Get down,” Ryan barked. Shells crashed against the hull of the ship. “Down!”

Kastner fired back with his blast pistol. A wave of flame rolled up the hillside at the soldiers. The hatch came shut with a bang. Kastner spun the bolts and slid the inner lock into place. “Ready. All ready.”

Ryan threw the power switch. Outside, the remaining soldiers fought through the flame to the side of the ship. Ryan could see their faces through the port, seared and scorched by the blast.

One man raised his gun awkwardly. Most of them were down, rolling and struggling to rise. As the scene dimmed and faded he saw one of them crawling to his knees. The man’s clothing was on fire. Smoke billowed from him, from his arms and shoulders. His face was contorted with pain. He reached out, toward the ship, reaching up at Ryan, his hands shaking, his body bent.

Suddenly Ryan froze.

He was still staring fixedly when the scene winked out and there was nothing. Nothing at all. The meters changed reading. Across the time map the arms moved calmly, tracing their lines.

In the last moment Ryan had looked directly into the man’s face. The pain-contorted face. The features had been twisted, screwed up out of shape. And the horn-rimmed glasses were gone. But there was no doubt — it was Schonerman.

Ryan sat down. He ran a shaking hand through his hair.

“You’re certain?” Kastner said.

“Yes. He must have come out of the sleep very quickly. It reacts differently on each person. And he was at the far end of the room. He must have come out of it and followed after us.”

“Was he badly injured?”

“I don’t know.”

Kastner opened his briefcase. “Anyhow, we have the papers.”

Ryan nodded, only half hearing. Schonerman injured, blasted, his clothing on fire. That had not been part of the plan.

But more important — *had it been part of history?*

For ftie first time the ramification of what they had done was beginning to emerge in his mind. Their own concern had been to obtain Schonerman’s papers, so that USIC could make use of the artificial brain. Properly used, Schonerman’s discovery could have great value in aiding the restoration of demolished Terra. Armies of worker-robots replanting and rebuilding. A mechanical army to make Terra fertile again. Robots could do in a generation what humans would toil at for years. Terra could be reborn.

But in returning to the past had they introduced new factors? Had a new past been created? Had some kind of balance been upset?

Ryan stood up and paced back and forth.

“What is it?” Kastner said. “We got the papers.”

“I know.”

“USIC will be pleased. The League can expect aid from now on. Whatever it wants. This will set up USIC forever. After all, USIC will manufacture the robots. Worker-robots. The end of human labor. Machines instead of men to work the ground.”

Ryan nodded. “Fine.”

“Then what’s wrong?”

“I’m worried about our continuum.”

“What are you worried about?”

Ryan crossed to the control board and studied the time map. The ship was moving back toward the present, the arms tracing a path back. “I’m worried about new factors we may have introduced into past continuums. There’s no record of Schonerman being injured. There’s no record of this event. It may have set a different causal chain into motion.”

“Like what?”

“I don’t know. But I intend to find out. We’re going to make a stop right away and discover what new factors we’ve set into motion.”

Ryan moved the ship into a continuum immediately following the Schonerman incident. It was early October, a little over a week later. He landed the ship in a farmer’s field outside of Des Moines, Iowa, at sunset. A cold autumn night with the ground hard and brittle underfoot.

Ryan and Kastner walked into town, Kastner holding tightly onto his briefcase. Des Moines had been bombed by Russian guided missiles. Most of the industrial sections were gone. Only military men and construction workers still remained in the city. The civilian population had been evacuated.

Animals roamed around the deserted streets, looking for food. Glass and debris lay everywhere. The city was cold and desolate. The streets were gutted and wrecked from the fires following the bombing. The autumn air was heavy with the decaying smells of vast heaps of rubble and bodies mixed together in mounds at intersections and open lots.

From a boarded-up newsstand Ryan stole a copy of a news magazine, *Week Review.* The magazine was damp and covered with mold. Kastner put

it into his briefcase and they returned to the time ship. Occasional soldiers passed them, moving weapons and equipment out of the city. No one challenged them.

They reached the time ship and entered, locking the hatch behind them. The fields around them were deserted. The farm building had been burned down, and the crops were withered and dead. In the driveway the remains of a ruined automobile lay on its side, a charred wreck. A group of ugly pigs nosed around the remains of the farmhouse, searching for something to eat.

Ryan sat down, opened the magazine. He studied it for a long time, turning the damp pages slowly.

“What do you see?” Kastner asked.

“All about the war. It’s still in the opening stages. Soviet guided missiles dropping down. American disk bombs showering all over Russia.”

“Any mention of Schonerman?”

“Nothing I can find. Too much else going on.” Ryan went on studying the magazine. Finally, on one of the back pages, he found what he was looking for. A small item, only a paragraph long.

SOVIET AGENTS SURPRISED

A group of Soviet agents, attempting to demolish a Government research station at Harristown, Kansas, were fired on by guards and quickly routed. The agents escaped, after attempting to slip past the guards into the work offices of the station. Passing themselves off as FBI men, the Soviet agents tried to gain entry as the early morning shift was beginning work. Alert guards intercepted them and gave chase. No damage was done to the research labs or equipment. Two guards and one worker were killed in the encounter. The names of the guards

Ryan clutched the magazine.

“What is it?” Kastner hurried over.

Ryan read the rest of the article. He laid down the magazine, pushing it slowly towards Kastner.

“What is it?” Kastner searched the page.

“Schonerman died. Killed by the blast. We killed him. We’ve changed the past.”

Ryan stood up and walked to the port. He lit a cigarette, some of his composure returning. “We set up new factors and started a new line of events. There’s no telling where it will end.”

“What do you mean?”

“Someone else may discover the artificial brain. Maybe the shift will rectify itself. The time flow will resume its regular course.”

“Why should it?”

“I don’t know. As it stands, we killed him and stole his papers. There’s no way the Government can get hold of his work. They won’t even know it ever existed. Unless someone else does the same work, covers the same material —”

“How will we know?”

“We’ll have to take more looks. It’s the only way to find out.”

Ryan selected the year 2051.

In 2051 the first claws had begun to appear. The Soviets had almost won the war. The UN was beginning to bring out the claws in the last desperate

attempt to turn the tide of the war.

Ryan landed the time ship at the top of a ridge. Below them a level plain stretched out, crisscrossed with ruins and barbed wire and the remains of weapons.

Kastner unscrewed the hatch and stepped gingerly out onto the ground.

“Be careful,” Ryan said. “Remember the claws.”

Kastner drew his blast gun. “I’ll remember.”

“At this stage they were small. About a foot long. Metal. They hid down in the ash. The humanoid types hadn’t come into existence, yet.”

The sun was high in the sky. It was about noon. The air was warm and thick. Clouds of ash rolled across the ground, blown by the wind.

Suddenly Kastner tensed. “Look. What’s that? Coming along the road.”

A truck bumped slowly toward them, a heavy brown truck, loaded with soldiers. The truck made its way along the road to i the base of the ridge. Ryan drew his blast gun. He and Kastner stood ready.

The truck stopped. Some of the soldiers leaped down and started up the side of the ridge, striding through the ash.

“Get set,” Ryan murmured.

The soldiers reached them, halted a few feet away. Ryan and Kastner stood silently, their blast guns up.

One of the soldiers laughed. “Put them away. Don’t you know the war’s over?”

“Over?”

The soldiers relaxed. Their leader, a big man with a red face, wiped sweat from his dirty forehead and pushed his way up to Ryan. His uniform was ragged and dirty. He wore boots, split and caked with ash. “That war’s been over for a week. Come on! There’s a lot to do. We’ll take you on back.”

“Back?”

“We’re rounding up all the outposts. You were cut off? No communications?”

“No,” Ryan said.

“Be months before everyone knows the war’s over. Come along. No time to stand here jawing.”

Ryan shifted. “Tell me. You say the war is really over? But —”

“Good thing, too. We couldn’t have lasted much longer.” The officer tapped his belt. “You don’t by any chance have a cigarette, do you?”

Ryan brought out his pack slowly. He took the cigarettes from it and handed them to the officer, crumpling the pack carefully and restoring it to his pocket.

“Thanks.” The officer passed the cigarettes around to his men. They lit up. “Yes, it’s a good thing. We were almost finished.”

Kastner’s mouth opened. “The claws. What about the claws?”

The officer scowled. “What?”

“Why did the war end so — so suddenly?”

“Counter-revolution in the Soviet Union. We had been dropping agents and material for months. Never thought anything would come of it, though. They were a lot weaker than anyone realized.”

“Then the war’s really ended?”

“Of course.” The officer grabbed Ryan by the arm. “Let’s go. We have work to do. We’re trying to clear this god damn ash away and get things planted.”

“Planted? Crops?”

“Of course. What would *you* plant?”

Ryan pulled away. “Let me get this straight. The war is over. No more fighting. And you know nothing about any claws? Any kind of weapon called claws?”

The officer’s face wrinkled. “What do you mean?”

“Mechanical killers. Robots. As a weapon.”

The circle of soldiers drew back a little. “What the hell is he talking about?”

“You better explain,” the officer said, his face suddenly hard. “What’s this about claws?”

“No weapon was ever developed along those lines?” Kastner asked.

There was silence. Finally one of the soldiers grunted. “I think I know what he means. He means Dowling’s mine.”

Ryan turned. “What?”

“An English physicist. He’s been experimenting with artificial mines, self-governing. Robot mines. But the mines couldn’t repair themselves. So the Government abandoned the project and increased its propaganda work instead.”

“That’s why the war’s over,” the officer said. He started off. “Let’s go.”

The soldiers trailed after him, down the side of the ridge.

“Coming?” The officer halted, looking back at Ryan and Kastner.

“We’ll be along later,” Ryan said. “We have to get our equipment together.”

“All right. The camp is down the road about half a mile. There’s a settlement there. People coming back from the Moon.”

“From the Moon?”

“We had started moving units to Luna, but now there isn’t any need. Maybe it’s a good thing. Who the hell wants to leave Terra?”

“Thanks for the cigarettes,” one the soldiers called back. The soldiers piled in the back of the truck. The officer slid behind the wheel. The truck started up and continued on its way, rumbling along the road.

Ryan and Kastner watched it go.

“Then Schonerman’s death was never balanced,” Ryan murmured. “A whole new past —”

“I wonder how far the change carries. I wonder if it carries up to our own time.”

“There’s only one way to find out.”

Kastner nodded. “I want to know right away. The sooner the better. Let’s get started.”

Ryan nodded, deep in thought. “The sooner the better.”

They entered the time ship. Kastner sat down with his briefcase. Ryan adjusted the controls. Outside the port the scene winked out of existence. They were in the time flow again, moving toward the present.

Ryan’s face was grim. “I can’t believe it. The whole structure of the past changed. An entire new chain set in motion. Expanding through every continuum. Altering more and more of our stream.”

“Then it won’t be our present, when we get back. There’s no telling how different it will be. All stemming from Schonerman’s death. A whole new history set in motion from one incident.”

“Not from Schonerman’s death,” Ryan corrected.

“What do you mean?”

“Not from his death but from the loss of his papers. Because Schonerman died the Government didn’t obtain a successful methodology by which they could build an artificial brain. Therefore the claws never came into existence.”

“It’s the same thing.”

“Is it?”

Kastner looked up quickly. “Explain.”

“Schonerman’s death is of no importance. The loss of his papers to the Government is the determining factor.” Ryan pointed at Kastner’s briefcase. “Where are the papers? In there. We have them.”

Kastner nodded. “That’s true.”

“We can restore the situation by moving back into the past and delivering the papers to some agency of the Government. Schonerman is unimportant. It’s his papers that matter.”

Ryan’s hand moved toward the power switch.

“Wait!” Kastner said. “Don’t we want to see the present? We should see what changes carry down to our own time.”

Ryan hesitated. “True.”

“Then we can decide what we want to do. Whether we want to restore the papers.”

“All right. We’ll continue to the present and then make up our minds.”

The fingers crossing the time map had returned almost to their original position. Ryan studied them for a long time, his hand on the power switch. Kastner held on tightly to the briefcase, his arms wrapped around it, the heavy leather bundle resting in his lap.

“We’re almost there,” Ryan said.

“To our own time?”

“In another few moments.” Ryan stood up, gripping the switch. “I wonder what we’ll see.”

“Probably very little we’ll recognize.”

Ryan took a deep breath, feeling the cold metal under his fingers. How different would their world be? Would they recognize anything? Had they swept everything familiar out of existence?

A vast chain had been started in motion. A tidal wave moving through time, altering each continuum, echoing down through all the ages to come. The second part of the war had never happened. Before the claws could be invented the war had ended. The concept of the artificial brain had never been transformed into workable practice. The most potent engine off war had never come into existence. Human energies had turned from war to rebuilding of the planet.

Around Ryan the meters and dials vibrated. In a few seconds they would be back. What would Terra be like? Would anything be the same?

The Fifty Cities. Probably they would not exist. Jon, his son, sitting quietly in his room reading. USIC. The Government. The League and its labs and offices, its buildings and roof fields and guards. The whole complicated social structure. Would it all be gone without a trace? Probably.

And what would he find instead?

“We’ll know in a minute,” Ryan murmured.

“It won’t be long.” Kastner got to his feet and moved to the port. “I want to see it. It should be a very unfamiliar world.”

Ryan threw the power switch. The ship jerked, pulling out of the time flow. Outside the port something drifted and turned, as the ship righted

itself. Automatic gravity controls slipped into place. The ship was rushing above the surface of the ground.

Kastner gasped.

“What do you see?” Ryan demanded, adjusting the velocity of the ship. “What’s out there?”

Kastner said nothing.

“What do you see?”

After a long time Kastner turned away from the port. “Very interesting. Look for yourself.”

“What’s out there?”

Kastner sat down slowly, picking up his briefcase. “This opens up a whole new line of thought.”

Ryan made his way to the port and gazed out. Below the ship lay Terra. But not the Terra they had left.

Fields, endless yellow fields. And parks. Parks and yellow fields. Squares of green among the yellow, as far as the eye could see. Nothing else.

“No cities,” Ryan said thickly.

“No. Don’t you remember? The people are all out in the fields. Or walking in the parks. Discussing the nature of the universe.”

“This is what Jon saw.”

“Your son was extremely accurate.”

Ryan moved back to the controls, his face blank. His mind was numb. He sat down and adjusted the landing grapples. The ship sank lower and lower until it was coasting over the flat fields. Men and women glanced up at the ship, startled. Men and women in robes.

They passed over a park. A herd of animals rushed frantically away. Some kind of deer.

This was the world his son had seen. This was his vision. Fields and parks and men and women in long flowing robes. Walking along the paths. Discussing the problems of the universe.

And the other world, his world, no longer existed. The League was gone. His whole life’s work destroyed. In this world it did not exist. Jon. His son. Snuffed out. He would never see him again. His work, his son, everything he had known had winked out of existence.

“We have to go back,” Ryan said suddenly.

Kastner blinked. “Beg pardon?”

“We have to take the papers back to the continuum where they belong. We can’t recreate the situation exactly, but we can place the papers in the Government’s hands. That will restore all the relevant factors.”

“Are you serious?”

Kastner stepped back, whipping out his blaster. Ryan lunged. His shoulder caught Kastner, bowling the little businessman over. The blaster skidded across the floor of the ship, clattering against the wall. The papers fluttered in all directions.

“You damn fool!” Ryan grabbed at the papers, dropping down to his knees.

Kastner chased after the blaster. He scooped it up, his round face set with owlish determination. Ryan saw him out of the corner of his eye. For a moment the temptation to laugh almost overcame him. Kastner’s face was flushed, his cheeks burning red. He fumbled with the blaster, trying to aim it.

“Kastner, for God’s sake —”

The little businessman’s fingers tightened around the trigger. Abrupt fear chilled Ryan. He scrambled to his feet. The blaster roared, flame crackling across the time ship. Ryan leaped out of the way, singed by the trail of fire.

Schonerman’s papers flared up, glowing where they lay scattered over the floor. For a brief second they burned. Then the glow died out, flickering into charred ash. The thin acrid smell of the blast drifted to Ryan, tickling his nose and making his eyes water.

“Sorry,” Kastner murmured. He laid the blaster down on the control board. “Don’t think you better get us down? We’re quite close to the surface.”

Ryan moved mechanically to the control board. After a moment he took his seat and began to adjust the controls, decreasing the velocity of the ship. He said nothing.

“I’m beginning to understand about Jon,” Kastner murmured. “He must have had some kind of parallel time sense. Awareness of other possible futures. As work progressed on the time ship his visions increased, didn’t they? Every day his visions became more real. Every day the time ship became more actual.”

Ryan nodded.

“This opens up whole new lines of speculation. The mystical visions of medieval saints. Perhaps they were of other futures, other time flows. Visions of hell would be worse time flows. Visions of heaven would be better time flows. Ours must stand some place in the middle. And the vision of the eternal unchanging world. Perhaps that’s an awareness of non-time. Not another world but this world, seen outside of time. We’ll have to think more about that, too.”

The ship landed, coming to rest at the edge of one of the parks. Kastner crossed to the port and gazed out at the trees beyond the ship.

“In the books my family saved there were some pictures of trees,” he said thoughtfully. “These trees here, by us. They’re pepper trees. Those over there are what they call evergreen trees. They stay that way all year around. That’s why the name.”

Kastner picked up his briefcase, gripping it tightly. He moved toward the hatch.

“Let’s go find some of the people. So we can begin discussing things. Metaphysical things.” He grinned at Ryan. “I always did like metaphysical things.”

The Cosmic Poachers

“What kind of ship is it?” Captain Shure demanded, staring fixedly at the viewscreen, his hands gripping the fine adjustment.

Navigator Nelson peered over his shoulder. “Wait a minute.” He swung the control camera over and snapped a photograph from the screen. The photograph disappeared down the message tube to the chart room. “Keep calm. We’ll get a determination from Barnes.”

“What are they doing here? What are they after? They must know the Sirius system is closed.”

“Notice the balloon sides.” Nelson traced the screen with his finger. “It’s a freighter. Look at the bulge. It’s a cargo carrier.”

“And while you’re looking, notice *that.*” Shure whirled the enlarger. The image of the ship bloated, expanding until it filled the screen. “See that row of projections?”

“So?”

“Heavy guns. Countersunk. For deep-space firing. It’s a freighter, but it’s also armed.”

“Pirates, maybe.”

“Maybe.” Shure toyed with the communications mike. “I’m tempted to put a call back to Terra.”

“Why?”

“This may be a scout.”

Nelson’s eyes flickered. “You think they’re in the process of sounding us out? But if there are more, why don’t our screens pick them up?”

“The rest may be out of range.”

“More than two light years? I have the screens up to maximum. And they’re the best screens available.”

The determination popped up the tube from the chart room, skidding out on the table. Shure broke it open and scanned it rapidly. He passed it to Nelson. “Here.”

The ship was Adharan design. First-class, from a recent freighter group. Barnes had noted in his own hand: “But not supposed to be armed. Must have added the cannon. Not standard equipment on Adharan freighters.”

“Then it’s not bait,” Shure murmured. “We can rule that out. What’s the story on Adhara? Why would an Adharan ship be in the Sirius system? Terra has closed this whole region off for years. They must know they can’t trade here.”

“No one knows much about Adharans. They participated in the All-galaxy Trade Conference, but that’s all.”

“What race are they?”

“Arachnid type. Typical of this area. Based on the Great Murzim Stem. They’re a variant of the Murzim original. They keep mostly to themselves. Complex social structure, very rigid patterns. Organic-state grouping.”

“You mean they’re insects.”

“I suppose. In the same sense we’re lemurs.”

Shure turned his attention back to the viewscreen. He reduced magnification, watching intently. The screen followed the Adharan ship automatically, maintaining a direct alignment with it.

The Adharan ship was heavy and black, awkward in comparison to the sleek Terran cruiser. It bulged like a well-fed worm, its somber sides swollen almost to a full sphere. An occasional guide light blinked on and off as the ship approached the outermost planet of the Sirius system. It moved slowly, cautiously, feeling its way along. It entered the orbit of the tenth planet and began maneuvering for descent. Brake jets burst on, flashing red. The bloated worm drifted down, lowering itself toward the surface of the planet.

“They’re landing,” Nelson murmured.

“That’s fine. They’ll be stationary. Good target for us.”

On the surface of the tenth planet the Adharan freighter lay resting, its jets dying into silence. A cloud of exhaust particles rose from it. The freighter had landed between two mountain ranges, on a barren waste of gray sand. The surface of the tenth planet was utterly barren. No life, atmosphere or water existed.

The planet was mostly rock, cold gray rock, with vast shadows and pits, a corroded sickly surface, hostile and bleak.

Abruptly the Adharan ship came to life. Hatches popped open. Tiny black dots rushed from the ship. The dots increased in number, a flood of specks pouring out of the freighter, scurrying across the sand. Some of them reached the mountains and disappeared among the craters and peaks. Others gained the far side, where they were lost in the long shadows.

“I’ll be damned,” Shure muttered. “It doesn’t make sense. What are they after? We’ve gone over these planets with a fine tooth comb. There’s nothing anyone would want, down there.”

“They may have different wants, or different methods.”

Shure stiffened. “Look. Their cars are coming back to the ship.”

The black dots had reappeared, emerging from the shadows and craters. They hurried back toward the mother worm, racing across the sand. The hatches opened. One by one the cars popped into the ship and disappeared. A few belated cars made their way to the ship and entered. The hatches clamped shut.

“What in hell could they have found?” Shure said.

Communications Officer Barnes entered the control room, craning his neck. “Still down there? Let me have a look. I’ve never seen an Adharan ship.”

On the surface of the planet the Adharan ship stirred. Suddenly it shuddered, quivering from stem to stern. It rose from the surface, gaining altitude rapidly. It headed for the ninth planet. For a time it circled the ninth planet, observing the pitted, eroded surface below. Empty basins of dried-up oceans stretched on like immense pie pans.

The Adharan ship selected one of the basins and settled down to a landing, blowing clouds of exhaust up into the sky.

“The same damn thing again,” Shure murmured.

Hatches opened. Black specks leaped out onto the surface and rushed off in all directions.

Shure’s jaw jutted out angrily. “We have to find out what they’re after. Look at them go! They know exactly what they’re doing.” He grabbed up the communication mike. Then he dropped it. “We can handle this alone. We won’t need Terra.”

“It’s armed, don’t forget.”

“We’ll catch it as it lands. They’re stopping at each planet in order. We’ll go all the way in to the fourth planet.” Shure moved rapidly, bringing the command chart into position. “When they land on the fourth planet we’ll be there waiting for them.”

“They may put up a fight.”

“Maybe. But we have to find out what they’re loading — and whatever it is, it belongs to us.”

The fourth planet of the Sirius system had an atmosphere, and some water. Shure landed his cruiser in the ruins of an ancient city, long deserted.

The Adharan freighter had not appeared. Shure scanned the sky and then raised the main hatch. He and Barnes and Nelson stepped outside cautiously, armed with heavy-duty Slem rifles. Behind them the hatch slammed back in place and the cruiser took off, soaring up into the sky.

They watched it go, standing together with their rifles ready. The air was cold and thin. They could feel it blowing around their pressure suits.

Barnes turned up the temperature of his suit. “Too cold for me.”

“Makes you realize we’re still Terrans, even though we’re light years from home,” Nelson said.

“Here’s the outline,” Shure said. “We can’t blast them. That’s out. We’re after their cargo. If we blast them we’ll blast the cargo along with them.”

“What’ll we use?”

“We’ll shoot a vapor cloud around them.”

“A vapor cloud? But —”

“Captain,” Nelson said, “we can’t use a vapor cloud. We won’t be able to get near them until the vapor has become inert.”

“There’s a wind. The vapor will dissipate very quickly. Anyhow, it’s all we can do. We’ll have to take the chance. As soon as the Adharan is sighted, we must be ready to open fire.”

“What if the cloud misses?”

“Then we’re in for a fight.” Shure studied the sky intently. “I think it’s coming. Let’s go.”

They hurried to a hill of piled up rocks, remains of columns and towers heaped in great mounds, mixed with debris and rubble.

“This will do.” Shure crouched down, his Slem rifle held tightly. “Here they come.”

The Adharan ship had appeared above them. It was preparing to land. Down it settled, its jets roaring, exhaust particles rising. With a crash it struck the ground, bouncing a little and finally coming to rest.

Shure gripped his phone. “Okay.”

Above them in the sky the cruiser appeared, sweeping down over the Adharan. From the cruiser a blue-white cloud shot, drilled out by pressure jets directly at the black Adharan ship. The cloud reached the parked freighter. It billowed around it, fusing into it.

The surface of the Adharan hull glowed briefly. It began to fall in, eaten away. Corroded. The Terran cruiser swept past, completing its run. It disappeared into the sky.

From the Adharan ship figures were emerging, jumping out onto the ground. The figures sprang in all directions, long-legged, leaping wildly around. Most of the figures hopped excitedly up onto their ship, dragging hoses and equipment, working frantically, disappearing into the vapor cloud.

“They’re spraying.”

More Adharans appeared, leaping frantically up and down, onto their ship, onto the ground, some this way, others in no particular direction at all.

“Like when you step on an ant hill,” Barnes muttered.

The hull of the Adharan ship was covered with clinging Adharans, spraying desperately, trying to halt the corrosive action of the vapor. Above them the Terran cruiser reappeared, entered a second run. It grew, swelling from a dot into a tear-shaped needle, flashing in the sunlight from Sirius. The freighter’s bank of guns jutted up desperately, trying to align themselves with the swiftly moving cruiser.

“Bomb close by,” Shure ordered into his phone. “But no direct hits. I want to save the cargo.”

The cruiser’s bomb racks opened. Two bombs fell, singing down in an expert arc. They straddled the inert freighter, bursting on both sides. Towering clouds of rock and debris rose up, billowing over the freighter. The black form shuddered, Adharans sliding off the hull onto the ground. The bank of guns fired a few futile blasts and the cruiser swept past and disappeared.

“They haven’t got a chance,” Nelson murmured. “They can’t leave the ground until they’ve got their hull sprayed.”

Most of the Adharans were beginning to flee from their ship, scattering onto the ground.

“It’s almost over,” Shure said. He got to his feet and stepped out from the ruins. “Let’s go.”

A white flare burst up from the Adharans, showering sparks in the sky. The Adharans milled aimlessly around, confused by the attack. The cloud of vapor had virtually dissipated. The flare was the conventional signal of capitulation. The cruiser was circling again, above the freighter, waiting for orders from Shure.

“Look at them,” Barnes said. “Insects, big as people.”

“Come on!” Shure said impatiently. “Let’s go. I’m anxious to see what’s inside.”

The Adharan commander met them outside its ship. It moved toward them, apparently dazed from the attack.

Nelson and Shure and Barnes gazed at it in revulsion. “Lord,” Barnes muttered. “So that’s what they’re like.”

The Adharan stood almost five feet tall, enclosed in a black chitin shell. It stood on four slender legs, two more weaving uncertainly halfway up its body. It wore a loose belt, holding its gun and equipment. Its eyes were complex, multi-lensed. Its mouth was a narrow slit at the base of its elongated skull. It had no ears.

Behind the Adharan commander a group of crew members stood uncertainly, some of them with weapon tubes partly raised. The Adharan commander made a series of sharp clicks with its mouth, waving its antennae. The other Adharans lowered their tubes.

“How is communication with this race possible?” Barnes asked Nelson.

Shure moved forward. “It doesn’t matter. We have nothing to say to them. They know they are illegally here. It’s the cargo we’re interested in.”

He pushed past the Adharan commander. The group of Adharans made way for him. He entered the ship, Nelson and Barnes following after him.

The interior of the Adharan ship reeked and dripped with slime. The passages were narrow and dark, like long tunnels. The floor was slippery underfoot. A few crew members scuttled around in the darkness, their claws and antennae waving nervously. Shure flashed his light down one of the corridors.

“This way. It looks like the main passage.”

The Adharan commander followed close behind them. Shure ignored him. Outside, the cruiser had landed nearby. Nelson could see Terran soldiers standing around on the surface.

Ahead of them a metal door closed off the corridor. Shure indicated the door, making an opening motion.

“Open it.”

The Adharan commander retreated, making no move to open the door. A few more Adharans scuttled up, all of them with weapon tubes.

“They may fight yet,” Nelson said calmly.

Shure raised his Slem rifle at the door. “I’ll have to blast it.”

The Adharans clicked excitedly. None of them approached the door.

“All right,” Shure said grimly. He fired. The door dissolved, smoking into ruins. It sank down, leaving an opening wide enough to pass through.

The Adharans rushed around wildly, clicking to each other. More of them left the hull and poured into the ship, flocking around the three Terrans.

"Come on," Shure said, stepping through the gaping hole. Nelson and Barnes followed him, Slem rifles ready.

The passage led down. The air was heavy and thick, and as they walked down the passage, Adharans pressed behind them.

"Get back." Shure spun, his rifle up. The Adharans halted. "Stay back. Come on. Let's go."

The Terrans turned a corner. They were in the hold. Shure advanced cautiously, moving with care. Several Adharan guards stood with drawn weapon tubes.

"Get out of the way." Shure waved his Slem rifle. Reluctantly, the guards moved aside. "Come on!"

The guards separated. Shure advanced.

And stopped, amazed.

Before them was the cargo of the ship. The hold was half-filled with carefully stacked orbs of milky fire, giant jewels like immense pearls. Thousands of them. As far back as they could see. Disappearing back into the recesses of the ship, endless stacks of them. All glowing with a soft radiance, an inner illumination that lit up the vast hold of the ship.

"Incredible!" Shure muttered.

"No wonder they were willing to slip in here without permission." Barnes took a deep breath, his eyes wide. "I think I'd do the same. Look at them!"

“Big, aren’t they?” Nelson said.

They glanced at each other.

“I’ve never seen anything like it,” Shure said, dazed. The Adharan guards were watching them warily, their weapon tubes ready. Shure advanced toward the first row of jewels, stacked neatly with mathematical precision. “It doesn’t seem possible. Jewels piled up like — like a warehouse full of doorknobs.”

“They may have belonged to the Adharans at one time,” Nelson said thoughtfully. “Maybe they were stolen by the city-builders of the Sirius system. Now they’re getting them back.”

“Interesting,” Barnes said. “Might explain why the Adharans found them so easily. Perhaps charts or maps existed.”

Shure grunted. “In any case they’re *ours*, now. Everything in the Sirius system belongs to Terra. It’s all been signed, sealed and agreed on.”

“But if these were originally stolen from the Adharans —”

“They shouldn’t have agreed to the closed-system treaties. They have their own system. This belongs to Terra.” Shure reached up toward one of the jewels. “I wonder how it feels.”

“Careful, Captain. It may be radioactive.”

Shure touched one of the jewels.

The Adharans grabbed him, throwing him back. Shure struggled. An Adharan caught hold of his Slem rifle and twisted it out of his hands.

Barnes fired. A group of Adharans puffed out of existence.

Nelson was down on one knee, firing at the passage entrance. The passage was choked with Adharans. Some were firing back. Thin heat beams cut over Nelson's head.

"They can't get us," Barnes gasped. "They're afraid to fire. Because of the jewels."

The Adharans were retreating into the passage, away from the hold. Those with weapons were being ordered back by the commander.

Shure snatched Nelson's rifle and blasted a knot of Adharans into particles. The Adharans were closing the passage. They rolled heavy emergency plates into position and welded them rapidly into place.

"Burn a hole," Shure barked. He turned his gun on the wall of the ship. "They're trying to seal us in here."

Barnes turned his gun on the wall. The two Slem beams ate into the side of the ship. Abruptly the wall gave way, a circular hole falling out.

Outside the ship Terran soldiers were fighting with the Adharans. The Adharans were retreating, making their way back as best they could, firing and hopping. Some of them hopped up onto their ship. Others turned and fled, throwing their guns down. They milled about in helpless confusion, running and leaping in all directions, clicking wildly.

The parked cruiser glowed into life, its heavy guns lowering into position.

"Don't fire," Shure ordered through his phone. "Leave their ship alone. It isn't necessary."

"They're finished," Nelson gasped, jumping onto the ground. Shure and Barnes leaped after him, out of the Adharan ship onto the surface. "They

don’t have a chance. They don’t know how to fight.”

Shure waved a group of Terran soldiers over to him. “Over here! Hurry up, damn it.”

Milky jewels were spilling out of the ship onto the ground, rolling and bouncing through the hole. Part of the containing struts had been blasted away. Stacks of jewels cascaded down and rolled around their feet, getting in their way.

Barnes scooped one up. It burned his gloved hand faintly, tingling his fingers. He held it to the light. The globe was opaque. Vague shapes swam in the milky fire, drifting back and forth. The globe pulsed and glowed, as if it were alive.

Nelson grinned at him. “Really something, isn’t it?”

“Lovely.” Barnes picked up another. On the hull of the ship an Adharan fired down at him futilely. “Look at them all. There must be thousands of them.”

“We’ll get one of our merchant ships here and have them loaded up,” Shure said. “I won’t feel safe until they’re on their way back to Terra.”

Most of the fighting had ceased. The remaining Adharans were being rounded up by the Terran soldiers.

“What about them?” Nelson said.

Shure didn’t answer. He was examining one of the jewels, turning it over and over. “Look at it,” he murmured. “Brings out different colors each way you hold it. Did you ever see anything like it?”

The big Terran freighter bumped to a landing. Its loading hatches dropped down. Jitney cars rumbled out, a fleet of stubby trucks. The jitney

cars crossed to the Adharan ship. Ramps dropped into place, as robot scoops prepared to go to work.

"Shovel them up," Silvanus Fry rambled, crossing over to Captain Shure. The Manager of Terran Enterprises wiped his forehead with a red handkerchief. "Astonishing haul, Captain. Quite a find." He put out his moist palm and they shook.

"I can't understand how we could have missed them," Shure said. "The Adharans walked in and picked them up. We watched them going from one planet to the next, like some sort of honey bee. I don't know why our own teams didn't find them."

Fry shrugged. "What does it matter?" He examined one of the jewels, tossing it up in the air and catching it. "I imagine every woman on Terra will have one of these around her neck — or will want one of these around her neck. In six months they won't know how they ever lived without them. That's the way people are, Captain." He put the globe into his briefcase, snapping it shut. "I think I'll take one home to my own wife."

The Adharan commander was brought over by a Terran soldier. He was silent, clicking nothing. The surviving Adharans had been stripped of their weapons and allowed to resume work on their ship. They had got the hull patched and most of the corrosion repaired.

"We're letting you go," Shure said to the Adharan commander. "We could try you as pirates and shoot you, but there wouldn't be much point in it. Better tell your government to stay out of the Sirius system from now on."

"He can't understand you," Barnes said mildly.

"I know. This is a formality. He gets the general idea, though."

The Adharan commander stood silently, waiting.

“That’s all.” Shure waved impatiently toward the Adharan ship. “Go on. Take off. Clear out of here. And don’t come back.”

The soldier released the Adharan. The Adharan made his way slowly back to his ship. He disappeared through the hatch. The Adharans working on the hull of the ship gathered up their equipment and followed their commander inside.

The hatches closed. The Adharan ship shuddered, as its jets roared into life. Awkwardly it lifted from the surface, rising up into the sky. It turned, heading toward outer space.

Shure watched it until it was gone.

“That’s that.” He and Fry walked rapidly toward the cruiser. “You think these jewels will attract some attention on Terra?”

“Of course. Is there any doubt?”

“No.” Shure was deep in thought. “They got to only five of the ten planets. There should be more on the remaining inner planets. After this load gets back to Terra we can begin work on the inner planets. If the Adharans found them we should be able to.”

Fry’s eyes glittered behind his glasses. “Fine. I didn’t realize there would be more.”

“There are.” Shure frowned, rubbing his jaw. “At least, there ought to be.”

“What’s wrong?”

“I can’t understand why we never found them.”

Fry clapped him on the back. “Don’t worry!”

Shure nodded, still deep in thought. “But I can’t understand why we never found them ourselves. Do you think it means anything?”

The Adharan commander sat at his control screen, adjusting his communication circuits.

The Check Base on the second planet of the Adharan system came into focus. The commander raised the sound cone to his neck.

“Bad luck.”

“What occurred?”

“Terrans attacked us and seized the balance of our cargo.”

“How much was still aboard?”

“Half. We had been to only five of the planets.”

“That’s unfortunate. They took the load to Terra?”

“I presume.”

Silence for a time. “How warm is Terra?”

“Fairly warm, I understand.”

“Maybe it will work out all right. We didn’t contemplate any hatching on Terra, but if —”

“I don’t like the idea of Terrans having a good part of our next generation. I’m sorry we hadn’t gotten farther in the distribution.”

“Don’t worry. We’ll petition the Mother to lay a whole new group to make up for it.”

“But what would the Terrans want with our eggs? Nothing but trouble will come, when hatching begins. I can’t understand them. Terran minds are beyond comprehension. I shudder to think what it will be like when the eggs hatch. — And on a humid planet, hatching should begin fairly soon…”

Progeny

Ed Doyle hurried. He caught a surface car, waved fifty credits in the robot driver's face, mopped his florid face with a red pocket-handkerchief, unfastened his collar, perspired and licked his lips and swallowed piteously all the way to the hospital.

The surface car slid up to a smooth halt before the great white-domed hospital building. Ed leaped out and bounded up the steps three at a time, pushing through the visitors and convalescent patients standing on the broad terrace. He threw his weight against the door and emerged in the lobby, astonishing the attendants and persons of importance moving about their tasks.

"Where?" Ed demanded, gazing around, his feet wide apart, his fists clenched, his chest rising and falling. His breath came hoarsely, like an animal's. Silence fell over the lobby. Everyone turned toward him, pausing in their work. "Where?" Ed demanded again. "Where is she? *They?"*

It was fortunate Janet had been delivered of a child on this of all days. Proxima Centauri was a long way from Terra and the service was bad. Anticipating the birth of his child, Ed had left Proxima some weeks before. He had just arrived in the city. While stowing his suitcase in the luggage tread at the station the message had been handed to him by a robot courier: *Los Angeles Central Hospital. At once.*

Ed hurried, and fast. As he hurried he couldn't help feeling pleased he had hit the day exactly right, almost to the hour. It was a good feeling. He had felt it before, during years of business dealings in the "colonies," the frontier, the fringe of Terran civilization where the streets were still lit by electric lights and doors opened by hand.

That was going to be hard to get used to. Ed turned toward the door behind him, feeling suddenly foolish. He had shoved it open, ignoring the

eye. The door was just now closing, sliding slowly back in place. He calmed down a little, putting his handkerchief away in his coat pocket. The hospital attendants were resuming their work, picking up their activities where they had left off. One attendant, a strapping late-model robot, coasted over to Ed and halted.

The robot balanced his noteboard expertly, his photocell eyes appraising Ed's flushed features. "May I inquire whom you are looking for, sir? Whom do you wish to find?"

"My wife."

"Her name, sir?"

"Janet. Janet Doyle. She's just had a child."

The robot consulted his board. "This way, sir." He coasted off down the passage.

Ed followed nervously. "Is she okay? Did I get here in time?" His anxiety was returning.

"She is quite well, sir." The robot raised his metal arm and a side door slid back. "In here, sir."

Janet, in a chic blue-mesh suit, was sitting before a mahogany desk, a cigarette between her fingers, her slim legs crossed, talking rapidly. On the other side of the desk a well-dressed doctor sat listening.

"Janet!" Ed said, entering the room.

"Hi, Ed." She glanced up at him. "You just now get in?"

"Sure. It's — it's all over? You — I mean, it's *happened?*"

Janet laughed, her even white teeth sparkling. “Of course. Come in and sit. This is Doctor Bish.”

“Hello, Doc.” Ed sat down nervously across from them. “Then it’s all over?”

“The event has happened,” Doctor Bish said. His voice was thin and metallic. Ed realized with a sudden shock that the doctor was a robot. A top-level robot, made in humanoid form, not like the ordinary metal-limbed workers. It had fooled him — he had been away so long. Doctor Bish appeared plump and well fed, with kindly features and eyeglasses. His large fleshy hands rested on the desk, a ring on one finger. Pinstripe suit and necktie. Diamond tie clasp. Nails carefully manicured. Hair black and evenly parted.

But his voice had given him away. They never seemed to be able to get a really human sound into the voice. The compressed air and whirling disc system seemed to fall short. Otherwise, it was very convincing.

“I understand you’ve been situated near Promixa, Mr Doyle,” Doctor Bish said pleasantly.

Ed nodded. “Yeah.”

“Quite a long way, isn’t it? I’ve never been out there. I have always wanted to go. Is it true they’re almost ready to push on to Sirius?”

“Look, Doc —”

“Ed, don’t be impatient.” Janet stubbed out her cigarette, glancing reprovingly up at him. She hadn’t changed in six months. Small blond face, red mouth, cold eyes like little blue rocks. And now, her perfect figure back again. “They’re bringing him here. It takes a few minutes. They have to wash him off and put drops in his eyes and take a wave shot of his brain.”

“He? Then it’s a boy?”

“Of course. Don’t you remember? You were with me when I had the shots. We agreed at the time. You haven’t changed your mind, have you?”

“Too late to change your mind now, Mr Doyle,” Doctor Bish’s toneless voice came, high-pitched and calm. “Your wife has decided to call him Peter.”

“Peter.” Ed nodded, a little dazed. “That’s right. We did decide, didn’t we? Peter.” He let the word roll around in his mind. “Yeah. That’s fine. I like it.”

The wall suddenly faded, turning from opaque to transparent. Ed spun quickly. They were looking into a brightly lit room, filled with hospital equipment and white-clad attendant robots. One of the robots was moving toward them, pushing a cart. On the cart was a container, a big metal pot.

Ed’s breathing increased. He felt a wave of dizziness. He went up to the transparent wall and stood gazing at the metal pot on the cart.

Doctor Bish rose. “Don’t you want to see, too, Mrs Doyle?”

“Of course.” Janet crossed to the wall and stood beside Ed. She watched critically, her arms folded.

Doctor Bish made a signal. The attendant reached into the pot and lifted out a wire tray, gripping the handles with his magnetic clamps. On the tray, dripping through the wire, was Peter Doyle, still wet from his bath, his eyes wide with astonishment. He was pink all over, except for a fringe of hair on the top of his head, and his great blue eyes. He was little and wrinkled and toothless, like an ancient withered sage.

“Golly,” Ed said.

Doctor Bish made a second signal. The wall slid back. The attendant robot advanced into the room, holding his dripping tray out. Doctor Bish removed Peter from the tray and held him up for inspection. He turned him around and around, studying him from every angle.

"He looks fine," he said at last.

"What was the result of the wave photo?" Janet asked.

"Result was good. Excellent tendencies indicated. Very promising. High development of the —" The doctor broke off. "What is it, Mr Doyle?"

Ed was holding out his hands. "Let me have him, Doc. I want to hold him." He grinned from ear to ear. "Let's see how heavy he is. He sure looks big."

Doctor Bish's mouth fell open in horror. He and Janet gasped.

"Ed!" Janet exclaimed sharply. "What's the matter with you?"

"Good heavens, Mr Doyle," the doctor murmured.

Ed blinked. "What?"

"If I had thought you had any such thing in mind —" Doctor Bish quickly returned Peter to the attendant. The attendant rushed Peter from the room, back to the metal pot. The cart and robot and pot hurriedly vanished, and the wall banged back in place.

Janet grabbed Ed's arm angrily. "Good Lord, Ed! Have you lost your mind? Come on. Let's get out of here before you do something else."

"But —"

“Come on.” Janet smiled nervously at Doctor Bish. “We’ll run along now, Doctor. Thanks so much for everything. Don’t pay any attention to him. He’s been out there so long, you know.”

“I understand,” Doctor Bish said smoothly. He had regained his poise. “I trust we’ll hear from you later, Mrs Doyle.”

Janet pulled Ed out into the hall. “Ed, what’s the matter with you? I’ve never been so embarrassed in all my life.” Two spots of red glowed in Janet’s cheeks. “I could have kicked you.”

“But what —”

“You know we aren’t allowed to touch him. What do you want to do, ruin his whole life?”

“But —”

“Come on.” They hurried outside the hospital, on to the terrace. Warm sunlight streamed down on them. “There’s no telling what harm you’ve done. He may already be hopelessly warped. If he grows up all warped and — and neurotic and emotional, it’ll be your fault.”

Suddenly Ed remembered. He sagged, his features drooping with misery. “That’s right. I forgot. Only robots can come near the children. I’m sorry, Jan. I got carried away. I hope I didn’t do anything they can’t fix.”

“How *could* you forget?”

“It’s so different out at Prox.” Ed waved to a surface car, crestfallen and abashed. The driver drew up in front of them. “Jan, I’m sorry as hell. I really am. I was all excited. Let’s go have a cup of coffee some place and talk. I want to know what the doctor said.”

Ed had a cup of coffee and Janet sipped at a brandy frappe. The Nymphite Room was pitch black except for a vague light oozing up from the table between them. The table diffused a pale illumination that spread over everything, a ghostly radiation seemingly without source. A robot waitress moved back and forth soundlessly with a tray of drinks. Recorded music played softly in the back of the room.

"Go on," Ed said.

"Go on?" Janet slipped her jacket off and laid it over the back of her chair. In the pale light her breasts glowed faintly. "There's not much to tell. Everything went all right. It didn't take long. I chatted with Doctor Bish most of the time."

"I'm glad I got here."

"How was your trip?"

"Fine."

"Is the service getting any better? Does it still take as long as it did?"

"About the same."

"I can't see why you want to go all the way out there. It's so — so cut off from things. What do you find out there? Are plumbing fixtures really that much in demand?"

"They need them. Frontier area. Everyone wants the refinements." Ed gestured vaguely. "What did he tell you about Peter? What's he going to be like? Can he tell? I guess it's too soon."

"He was going to tell me when you started acting the way you did. I'll call him on the vidphone when we get home. His wave pattern should be good. He comes from the best eugenic stock."

Ed grunted. “On your side, at least.”

“How long are you going to be here?”

“I don’t know. Not long. I’ll have to go back. I’d sure like to see him again, before I go.” He glanced up hopefully at his wife. “Do you think I can?”

“I suppose.”

“How long will he have to stay there?”

“At the hospital? Not long. A few days.”

Ed hesitated. “I didn’t mean at the hospital, exactly. I mean with *them*. How long before we can have him? How long before we can bring him home?”

There was silence. Janet finished her brandy. She leaned back, lighting a cigarette. Smoke drifted across to Ed, blending with the pale light. “Ed, I don’t think you understand. You’ve been out there so long. A lot has happened since you were a child. New methods, new techniques. They’ve found so many things they didn’t know. They’re making progress, for the first time. They know what to do. They’re developing a real methodology for dealing with children. For the growth period. Attitude development. Training.” She smiled brightly at Ed. “I’ve been reading all about it.”

“How long before we get him?”

“In a few days he’ll be released from the hospital. He’ll go to a child guidance center. He’ll be tested and studied. They’ll determine his various capacities and his latent abilities. The direction his development seems to be taking.”

“And then?”

“Then he’s put in the proper educational division. So he’ll get the right training. Ed, you know, I think he’s really going to be something! I could tell by the way Doctor Bish looked. He was studying the wave pattern charts when I came in. He had a look on his face. How can I describe it?” She searched for the word. “Well, almost — almost a greedy look. Real excitement. They take so much interest in what they’re doing. He —”

“Don’t say he. Say *it*.”

“Ed, really! What’s got into you?”

“Nothing.” Ed glared sullenly down. “Go on.”

“They make sure he’s trained in the right direction. All the time he’s there ability tests are given. Then, when he’s about nine, he’ll be transferred to —”

“Nine! You mean nine *years?*”

“Of course.”

“But when do we get him?”

“Ed, I thought you knew about this. Do I have to go over the whole thing?”

“My God, Jan! We can’t wait nine years!” Ed jerked himself upright. “I never heard of such a thing. Nine years? Why, he’ll be half grown up then.”

“That’s the point.” Janet leaned towards him, resting her bare elbow against the table. “As long as he’s growing he has to be with them. Not with us. Afterwards, when he’s finished growing, when he’s no longer so plastic, then we can be with him all we want.”

“Afterwards? When he’s eighteen?” Ed leaped up, pushing his chair back. “I’m going down there and get him.”

“Sit down, Ed.” Janet gazed up calmly, one supple arm thrown lightly over the back of her chair. “Sit down and act like an adult for a change.”

“Doesn’t it matter to you? Don’t you care?”

“Of course I care.” Janet shrugged. “But it’s necessary. Otherwise he won’t develop correctly. It’s for *his* good. Not ours. He doesn’t exist for us. Do you want him to have conflicts?”

Ed moved away from the table. “I’ll see you later.”

“Where are you going?”

“Just around. I can’t stand this kind of place. It bothers me. I’ll see you later.” Ed pushed across the room to the door. The door opened and he found himself on the shiny noonday street. Hot sunlight beat down on him. He blinked, adjusting himself to the blinding light. People streamed around him. People and noise. He moved with them.

He was dazed. He had known, of course. It was there in the back of his mind. The new developments in child care. But it had been abstract, general. Nothing to do with him. With *his* child.

He calmed himself, as he walked along. He was getting all upset about nothing. Janet was right, of course. It was for Peter’s good. Peter didn’t exist for them, like a dog or cat. A pet to have around the house. He was a human being, with his own life. The training was for him, not for them. It was to develop him, his abilities, his powers. He was to be molded, realized, brought out.

Naturally, robots could do the best job. Robots could train him scientifically, according to a rational technique. Not according to emotional whim. Robots didn't get angry. Robots didn't nag and whine. They didn't spank a child or yell at him. They didn't give conflicting orders. They didn't quarrel among themselves or use the child for their own ends. And there could be no *Oedipus Complex*, with only robots around.

No complexes at all. It had been discovered long ago that neurosis could be traced to childhood training. To the way parents brought up the child. The inhibitions he was taught, the manners, the lessons, the punishments, the rewards. Neuroses, complexes, warped development, all stemmed from the subjective relationship existing between the child and the parent. If perhaps the parent could be eliminated as a factor…

Parents could never become objective about their children. It was always a biased, emotional projection the parent held toward the child. Inevitably, the parent's view was distorted. No parent could be a fit instructor for his child.

Robots could study the child, analyze his needs, his wants, test his abilities and interests. Robots would not try to force the child to fit a certain mold. The child would be trained along his own lines; wherever scientific study indicated his interest and need lay.

Ed came to the corner. Traffic whirred past him. He stepped absently forward.

A clang and crash. Bars dropped in front of him, stopping him. A robot safety control.

"Sir, be more careful!" the strident voice came, close by him.

"Sorry." Ed stepped back. The control bars lifted. He waited for the lights to change. It was for Peter's own good. Robots could train him right. Later on, when he was out of growth stage, when he was not so pliant,

responsive — “It’s better for him,” Ed murmured. He said it again, half aloud. Some people glanced at him and he colored. Of course it was better for him. No doubt about it.

Eighteen. He couldn’t be with his son until he was eighteen. Practically grown up.

The lights changed. Deep in thought, Ed crossed the street with the other pedestrians, keeping carefully inside the safety lane. It was best for Peter. But eighteen years was a long time.

“A hell of a long time,” Ed murmured, frowning. “Too damn long a time.”

Doctor 2g-Y Bish carefully studied the man standing in front of him. His relays and memory banks clicked, narrowing down the image identification, flashing a variety of comparison possibilities past the scanner.

“I recall you, sir,” Doctor Bish said at last. “You’re the man from Proxima. From the colonies. Doyle, Edward Doyle. Let’s see. It was some time ago. It must have been —”

“Nine years ago,” Ed Doyle said grimly. “Exactly nine years ago, practically to the day.”

Doctor Bish folded his hands. “Sit down, Mr Doyle. What can I do for you? How is Mrs Doyle? Very engaging wife, as I recall. We had a delightful conversation during her delivery. How —”

“Doctor Bish, do you know where my son is?”

Doctor Bish considered, tapping his fingers on the desk top, the polished mahogany surface. He closed his eyes slightly, gazing off into the distance. “Yes. Yes, I know where your son is, Mr Doyle.”

Ed Doyle relaxed. “Fine.” He nodded, letting his breath out in relief.

“I know exactly where your son is. I placed him in the Los Angeles Biological Research Station about a year ago. He’s undergoing specialized training there. Your son, Mr Doyle, has shown exceptional ability. He is, shall I say, one of the few, the very few we have found with real possibilities.”

“Can I see him?”

“See him? How do you mean?”

Doyle controlled himself with an effort. “I think the term is clear.”

Doctor Bish rubbed his chin. His photocell brain whirred, operating at maximum velocity. Switches routed power surges, building up loads and leaping gaps rapidly, as he contemplated the man before him. “You wish to *view* him? That’s one meaning of the term. Or do you wish to talk to him? Sometimes the term is used to cover a more direct contact. It’s a loose word.”

“I want to talk to him.”

“I see.” Bish slowly drew some forms from the dispenser on his desk. “There are a few routine papers that have to be filled out first, of course. Just how long did you want to speak to him?”

Ed Doyle gazed steadily into Doctor Bish’s bland face. “I want to talk to him several hours. *Alone.”*

“Alone?”

“No robots around.”

Doctor Bish said nothing. He stroked the papers he held, creasing the edges with his nail. “Mr Doyle,” he said carefully, “I wonder if you’re in a proper emotional state to visit your son. You have recently come in from the colonies?”

“I left Proxima three weeks ago.”

“Then you have just arrived here in Los Angeles?”

“That’s right.”

“And you’ve come to see your son? Or have you other business?”

“I came for my son.”

“Mr Doyle, Peter is at a very critical stage. He has just recently been transferred to the Biology Station for his higher training. Up to now his training has been general. What we call the non-differentiated stage. Recently he has entered a new period. Within the last six months Peter has begun advanced work along his specific line, that of organic chemistry. He will —”

“What does Peter think about it?”

Bish frowned. “I don’t understand, sir.”

“How does *he* feel? Is it what he wants?”

“Mr Doyle, your son has the possibility of becoming one of the world’s finest bio-chemists. In all the time we have worked with human beings, in their training and development, we have never come across a more alert and integrated faculty for the assimilation of data, construction of theory, formulation of material, than that which your son possesses. All tests indicate he will rapidly rise to the top of his chosen field. He is still only a child, Mr Doyle, but it is the children who must be trained.”

Doyle stood up. “Tell me where I can find him. I’ll talk to him for two hours and then the rest is up to him.”

“The rest?”

Doyle clamped his jaw shut. He shoved his hands in his pockets. His face was flushed and set grim with determination. In the nine years he had grown much heavier, more stocky and florid. His thinning hair had turned iron-gray. His clothes were dumpy and unpressed. He looked stubborn.

Doctor Bish sighed. “All right, Mr Doyle. Here are your papers. The law allows you to observe your boy whenever you make proper application. Since he is out of his non-differentiated stage, you may also speak to him for a period of ninety minutes.”

“Alone?”

“You can take him away from the Station grounds for that length of time.” Doctor Bish pushed the papers over to Doyle. “Fill these out, and I’ll have Peter brought here.”

He looked up steadily at the man standing before him.

“I hope you’ll remember that any emotional experience at this crucial stage may do much to inhibit his development. He has chosen his field, Mr Doyle. He must be permitted to grow along his selected lines, unhindered by situational blocks. Peter has been in contact with our technical staff throughout his entire training period. He is not accustomed to contact with other human beings. So please be careful.”

Doyle said nothing. He grabbed up the papers and plucked out his fountain pen.

He hardly recognized his son when the two robot attendants brought him out of the massive concrete Station building and deposited him a few yards from Ed's parked surface car.

Ed pushed the door open. "Pete!" His heart was thumping heavily, painfully. He watched his son come toward the car, frowning in the bright sunlight. It was late afternoon, about four. A faint breeze blew across the parking lot, rustling a few papers and bits of debris.

Peter stood slim and straight. His eyes were large, deep brown, like Ed's. His hair was light, almost blond. More like Janet's. He had Ed's jaw, though, the firm line, clean and well chiseled. Ed grinned at him. Nine years it had been. Nine years since the robot attendant had lifted the rack up from the conveyor pot to show him the little wrinkled baby, red as a boiled lobster.

Peter had grown. He was not a baby any longer. He was a young boy, straight and proud, with firm features and wide, clear eyes.

"Pete," Ed said. "How the hell are you?"

The boy stopped by the door of the car. He gazed at Ed calmly. His eyes flickered, taking in the car, the robot driver, the heavy set man in the rumpled tweed suit grinning nervously at him.

"Get in. Get inside." Ed moved over. "Come on. We have places to go."

The boy was looking at him again. Suddenly Ed was conscious of his baggy suit, his unshined shoes, his gray stubbled chin. He flushed, yanking out his red pocket-handkerchief and mopping his forehead uneasily. "I just got off the ship, Pete. From Proxima. I haven't had time to change. I'm a little dusty. Long trip."

Peter nodded. "4.3 light years, isn't it?"

“Takes three weeks. Get in. Don’t you want to get in?”

Peter slid in beside him. Ed slammed the door.

“Let’s go.” The car started up. “Drive —” Ed peered out the window. “Drive up there. By the hill. Out of town.” He turned to Pete. “I hate big cities. I can’t get used to them.”

“There are no large cities in the colonies, are there?” Pete murmured. “You’re unused to urban living.”

Ed settled back. His heart had begun to slow down to its normal beat. “No, as a matter of fact it’s the other way around, Pete.”

“How do you mean?”

“I went to Prox *because* I couldn’t stand cities.”

Peter said nothing. The surface car was climbing, going up a steel highway into the hills. The Station, huge and impressive, spread out like a heap of cement bricks directly below them. A few cars moved along the road, but not many. Most transportation was by air, now. Surface cars had begun to disappear.

The road leveled off. They moved along the ridge of the hills. Trees and bushes rose on both sides of them. “It’s nice up here,” Ed said.

“Yes.”

“How — how have you been? I haven’t seen you for a long time. Just once. Just after you were born.”

“I know. Your visit is listed in the records.”

“You been getting along all right?”

“Yes. Quite well.”

“They treating you all right?”

“Of course.”

After a while Ed leaned forward. “Stop here,” he said to the robot driver.

The car slowed down, pulling over to the side of the road. “Sir, there is nothing —”

“This is fine. Let us out. We’ll walk from here.”

The car stopped. The door slid reluctantly open. Ed stepped quickly out of the car, on to the pavement. Peter got out slowly after him, puzzled. “Where are we?”

“No place.” Ed slammed the door. “Go on back to town,” he said to the driver. “We won’t need you.”

The car drove off. Ed walked to the side of the road. Peter came after him. The hill dropped away, falling down to the beginnings of the city below. A vast panorama stretched out, the great metropolis in the late afternoon sun. Ed took a deep breath, throwing his arms out. He took off his coat and tossed it over his shoulder.

“Come on.” He started down the hillside. “Here we go.”

“Where?”

“For a walk. Let’s get off this damn road.”

They climbed down the side of the hill, walking carefully, holding on to the grass and roots jutting out from the soil. Finally they came to a level place by a big sycamore tree. Ed threw himself down on the ground, grunting and wiping sweat from his neck.

"Here. Let's sit here."

Peter sat down carefully, a little way off. Ed's blue shirt was stained with sweat. He unfastened his tie and loosened his collar. Presently he searched through his coat pockets. He brought out his pipe and tobacco.

Peter watched him fill the pipe and light it with a big sulphur match. "What's that?" he murmured.

"This? My pipe." Ed grinned, sucking at the pipe. "Haven't you ever seen a pipe?"

"No."

"This is a good pipe. I got this when I first went out to Proxima. That was a long time ago, Pete. It was twenty-five years ago. I was just nineteen, then. Only about twice as old as you."

He put his tobacco away and leaned back, his heavy face serious, preoccupied.

"Just nineteen. I went out there as a plumber. Repair and sales, when I could make a sale. Terran Plumbing. One of those big ads you used to see. Unlimited opportunities. Virgin lands. Make a million. Gold in the streets." Ed laughed.

"How did you make out?"

"Not bad. Not bad at all. I own my own line, now, you know. I service the whole Proxima system. We do repairing, maintenance, building,

construction. I’ve got six hundred people working for me. It took a long time. It didn’t come easy.”

“No.”

“Hungry?”

Peter turned. “What?”

“Are you hungry?” Ed pulled a brown paper parcel from his coat and unwrapped it. “I still have a couple of sandwiches from the trip. When I come in from Prox I bring some food along with me. I don’t like to buy in the diner. They skin you.” He held out the parcel. “Want one?”

“No thank you.”

Ed took a sandwich and began to eat. He ate nervously, glancing at his son. Peter sat silently, a short distance off, staring ahead without expression. His smooth handsome face was blank.

“Everything all right?” Ed said.

“Yes.”

“You’re not cold, are you?”

“No.”

“You don’t want to catch cold.”

A squirrel crossed in front of them, hurrying toward the sycamore tree. Ed threw it a piece of his sandwich. The squirrel ran off a way, then came back slowly. It scolded at them, standing up on its hind feet, its great gray tail flowing out behind it.

Ed laughed. “Look at him. Ever see a squirrel before?”

“I don’t think so.”

“It’s good to come back to Terra once in a while. See some of the old things. They’re going, though.”

“Going?”

“Away. Destroyed. Terra is always changing.” Ed waved around at the hillside. “This will be gone, some day. They’ll cut down the trees. Then they’ll level it. Some day they’ll carve the whole range up and carry it off. Use it for fill, some place along the coast.”

“That’s beyond our scope,” Peter said.

“What?”

“I don’t receive that type of material. I think Doctor Bish told you. I’m working with bio-chemistry.”

“I know,” Ed murmured. “Say, how the hell did you ever get mixed up with that stuff? Bio-chemistry?”

“The tests showed that my abilities lie along those lines.”

“You enjoy what you’re doing?”

“What a strange thing to ask. Of course I enjoy what I’m doing. It’s the work I’m fitted for.”

“It seems funny as hell to me, starting a nine-year-old kid off on something like that.”

“Why?”

“My God, Pete. When I was nine I was bumming around town. In school sometimes, outside mostly, wandering here and there. Playing. Reading. Sneaking into the rocket launching yards all the time.” He considered. “Doing all sorts of things. When I was sixteen I hopped over to Mars. I stayed there a while. Worked as a hasher. I went on to Ganymede. Ganymede was all sewed up tight. Nothing doing there. From Ganymede I went out to Prox. Got a work-away all the way out. Big freighter.”

“You stayed at Proxima?”

“I sure did. I found what I wanted. Nice place, out there. Now we’re starting on to Sirius, you know.” Ed’s chest swelled. “I’ve got an outlet in the Sirius system. Little retail and service place.”

“Sirius is 8.8 light years from Sol.”

“It’s a long way. Seven weeks from here. Rough grind. Meteor swarms. Keeps things hot all the way out.”

“I can imagine.”

“You know what I thought I might do?” Ed turned toward his son, his face alive with hope and enthusiasm. “I’ve been thinking it over. I thought maybe I’d go out there. To Sirius. It’s a fine little place we have. I drew up the plans myself. Special design to fit with the characteristics of the system.”

Peter nodded.

“Pete —”

“Yes?”

“Do you think maybe you’d be interested? Like to hop out to Sirius and take a look? It’s a good place. Four clean planets. Never touched. Lots of room. Miles and miles of room. Cliffs and mountains. Oceans. Nobody around. Just a few colonists, families, some construction. Wide, level plains.”

“How do you mean, interested?”

“In going all the way out.” Ed’s face was pale. His mouth twitched nervously. “I thought maybe you’d like to come along and see how things are. It’s a lot like Prox was, twenty-five years ago. It’s good and clean out there. No cities.”

Peter smiled.

“Why are you smiling?”

“No reason.” Peter stood up abruptly. “If we have to walk back to the Station we’d better start. Don’t you think? It’s getting late.”

“Sure.” Ed struggled to his feet. “Sure, but —”

“When are you going to be back in the Sol system again?”

“Back?” Ed followed after his son. Peter climbed up the hill toward the road. “Slow down, will you?”

Peter slowed down. Ed caught up with him.

“I don’t know when I’ll be back. I don’t come here very often. No ties. Not since Jan and I separated. As a matter of fact I came here this time to —”

“This way.” Peter started down the road.

Ed hurried along beside him, fastening his tie and putting his coat on, gasping for breath. “Peter, what do you say? You want to hop out to Sirius with me? Take a look? It’s a nice place out there. We could work together. The two of us. If you want.”

“But I already have my work.”

“That stuff? That damn chemistry stuff?”

Peter smiled again.

Ed scowled, his face dark red. “Why are you smiling?” he demanded. His son did not answer. “What’s the matter? What’s so damn funny?”

“Nothing,” Peter said. “Don’t become excited. We have a long walk down.” He increased his pace slightly, his supple body swinging in long, even strides. “It’s getting late. We have to hurry.”

Doctor Bish examined his wristwatch, pushing back his pinstriped coat sleeve. “I’m glad you’re back.”

“He sent the surface car away,” Peter murmured. “We had to walk down the hill on foot.”

It was dark outside. The Station lights were coming on automatically, along the rows of buildings and laboratories.

Doctor Bish rose from his desk. “Sign this, Peter. Bottom of this form.”

Peter signed. “What is it?”

“Certifies you saw him in accord with the provisions of the law. We didn’t try to obstruct you in any way.”

Peter handed the paper back. Bish filed it away with the others. Peter moved toward the door of the doctor's office. "I'll go. Down to the cafeteria for dinner."

"You haven't eaten?"

"No."

Doctor Bish folded his arms, studying the boy. "Well?" he said. "What do you think of him? This is the first time you've seen your father. It must have been strange for you. You've been around us so much, in all your training and work."

"It was — unusual."

"Did you gain any impressions? Was there anything you particularly noticed?"

"He was very emotional. There was a distinct bias through everything he said and did. A distortion present, virtually uniform."

"Anything else?"

Peter hesitated, lingering at the door. He broke into a smile. "One other thing."

"What was it?"

"I noticed —" Peter laughed. "I noticed a distinct odor about him. A constant pungent smell, all the time I was with him."

"I'm afraid that's true of all of them," Doctor Bish said. "Certain skin glands. Waste products thrown off from the blood. You'll get used to it, after you've been around them more."

“Do I have to be around them?”

“They’re your own race. How else can you work with them? Your whole training is designed with that in mind. When we’ve taught you all we can, then you will —”

“It reminded me of something. The pungent odor. I kept thinking about it, all the time I was with him. Trying to place it.”

“Can you identify it now?”

Peter reflected. He thought hard, concentrating deeply. His small face wrinkled up. Doctor Bish waited patiently by his desk, arms folded. The automatic heating system clicked on for the night, warming the room with a soft glow that drifted gently around them.

“I know!” Peter exclaimed suddenly.

“What was it?”

“The animals in the biology lab. It was the same smell. The same smell as the experimental animals.”

They glanced at each other, the robot doctor and the promising young boy. Both of them smiled, a secret, private smile. A smile of complete understanding.

“I believe I know what you mean,” Doctor Bish said. “In fact, I know *exactly* what you mean.”

Some Kinds of Life

“Joan, for heaven’s sake!”

Joan Clarke caught the irritation in her husband’s voice, even through the wall-speaker. She left her chair by the vidscreen and hurried into the bedroom. Bob was rooting furiously around in the closet, pulling down coats and suits and tossing them on the bed. His face was flushed with exasperation.

“What are you looking for?”

“My uniform. Where is it? Isn’t it here?”

“Of course. Let me look.”

Bob got sullenly out of the way. Joan pushed past him and clicked on the automatic sorter. Suits bobbed by in quick succession, parading for her inspection.

It was early morning, about nine o’clock. The sky was bright blue. Not a single cloud was visible. A warm spring day, late in April. The ground outside the house was damp and black from the rains of the day before. Green shoots were already beginning to poke their way up through the steaming earth. The sidewalk was dark with moisture. Wide lawns glittered in the sparkling sunlight.

“Here it is.” Joan turned off the sorter. The uniform dropped into her arms and she carried it over to her husband. “Now next time don’t get so upset.”

“Thanks.” Bob grinned, embarrassed. He patted the coat. “But look, it’s all creased. I thought you were going to have the darn thing cleaned.”

“It’ll be all right.” Joan started up the bed-maker. The bed-maker smoothed out the sheets and blankets, folding them in place. The spread settled carefully around the pillows. “After you’ve had it on awhile it’ll look just lovely. Bob, you’re the fussiest man I know.”

“Sorry, honey,” Bob murmured.

“What’s wrong?” Joan came up to him and put her hand on his broad shoulder. “Are you worried about something?”

“No.”

“Tell me.”

Bob began to unfasten his uniform. “It’s nothing important. I didn’t want to bother you. Erickson called me at work yesterday to tell me my group is up again. Seems they’re calling two groups at once now. I thought I wouldn’t get jerked out for another six months.”

“Oh, Bob! Why didn’t you *tell* me?”

“Erickson and I talked a long time. ‘For God’s sake!’ I told him. ‘I was just up.’ ‘I know that, Bob,’ he said, ‘I’m sorry as hell about it but there’s nothing I can do. We’re all in the same boat. Anyhow, it won’t last long. Might as well get it over with. It’s the Martian situation. They’re all hot and bothered about it.’ That’s what he said. He was nice about it. Erickson’s a pretty good guy for a Sector Organizer.”

“When — when do you have to go?”

Bob looked at his watch. “I have to get down to the field by noon. Gives me three hours.”

“When will you be back?”

“Oh, I should be back in a couple of days — if everything goes all right. You know how these things are. It varies. Remember last October when I was gone a whole week? But that’s unusual. They rotate the groups so fast now you’re practically back before you start.”

Tommy came strolling in from the kitchen. “What’s up, Dad?” He noticed the uniform. “Say, your group up again?”

“That’s right.”

Tommy grinned from ear to ear, a delighted teenage grin. “You going to get in on the Martian business? I was following it over the vidscreen. Those Martians look like a bunch of dry weeds tied together in a bundle. You guys sure ought to be able to blow *them* apart.”

Bob laughed, whacking his son on the back. “You tell ‘em, Tommy.”

“I sure wish I was coming.”

Bob’s expression changed. His eyes became hard like gray flint. “No, you don’t, kid. Don’t say that.”

There was an uncomfortable silence.

“I didn’t mean anything,” Tommy muttered.

Bob laughed easily. “Forget it. Now all of you clear out so I can change.”

Joan and Tommy left the room. The door slid shut. Bob dressed swiftly, tossing his robe and pajamas on the bed and pulling his dark green uniform around him. He laced his boots up and then opened the door.

Joan had got his suitcase from the hall closet. “You’ll want this, won’t you?” she asked.

“Thanks.” Bob picked up the suitcase. “Let’s go out to the car.” Tommy was already absorbed at the vidscreen, beginning his schoolwork for the day. A biology lesson moved slowly across the screen.

Bob and Joan walked down the front steps and along the path to their surface car, parked at the edge of the road. The door opened as they approached. Bob threw his suitcase inside and sat down behind the wheel.

“Why do we have to fight the Martians?” Joan asked suddenly. “Tell me, Bob. Tell me why.”

Bob lit a cigarette. He let the gray smoke drift around the cabin of the car. “Why? You know as well as I do.” He reached out a big hand and thumped the handsome control board of the car. “Because of this.”

“What do you mean?”

“The control mechanism needs rexeroid. And the only rexeroid deposits in the whole system are on Mars. If we lose Mars we lose this.” He ran his hand over the gleaming control board. “And if we lose this how are we going to get around? Answer me that.”

“Can’t we go back to manual steering?”

“We could ten years ago. But ten years ago we were driving less than a hundred miles per hour. No human being could steer at the speeds these days. We couldn’t go back to manual steering without slowing down our pace.”

“Can’t we do that?”

Bob laughed. “Sweetheart, it’s ninety miles from here to town. You really think I could keep my job if I had to drive the whole way at thirty-five miles an hour? I’d be on the road all my life.”

Joan was silent.

“You see, we must have the darn stuff — the rexeroid. It makes our control equipment possible. We depend on it. We need it. We must keep mining operations going on Mars. We can’t afford to let the Martians get the rexeroid deposits away from us. See?”

“I see. And last year it was kryon ore from Venus. We had to have that. So you went and fought on Venus.”

“Darling, the walls of our houses wouldn’t maintain an even temperature without kyron. Kryon is the only non-living substance in the system that adjusts itself to temperature changes. Why, we’d — we’d all have to go back to floor furnaces again. Like my grandfather had.”

“And the year before it was lonolite from Pluto.”

“Lonolite is the only substance known that can be used in constructing the memory banks of the calculators. It’s the only metal with true retentive ability. Without lonolite we’d lose all our big computing machines. And you know how far we’d get without them.”

“All right.”

“Sweetheart, you know I don’t *want* to go. But I have to. We all have to.” Bob waved toward the house. “Do you want to give that up? You want to go back to the old ways?”

“No.” Joan moved away from the car. “All right, Bob. I’ll see you in a day or two then?”

“I hope so. This trouble should be over soon. Most of the New York groups are being called. The Berlin and Oslo groups are already there. It shouldn’t take long.”

“Good luck.”

“Thanks.” Bob closed the door. The motor started up automatically. “Say goodbye to Tommy for me.”

The car drove off, gaining speed, the automatic control board guiding it expertly into the main stream of traffic flowing down the highway. Joan watched until the car blended with the endless tide of flashing metal hulls, racing across the countryside in a bright ribbon toward the distant city. Then she went slowly back inside the house.

Bob never came back from Mars, so in a manner of speaking, Tommy became the man of the house. Joan got a release from school for him and after a while he began work as a lab technician at the Government Research Project a few miles down the road.

Bryan Erickson, the Sector Organizer, stopped one evening to see how they were getting along. “Nice little place you have here,” Erickson said, wandering around.

Tommy swelled with pride. “Sure is, isn’t it? Sit down and make yourself comfortable.”

“Thanks.” Erickson peered into the kitchen. The kitchen was in the process of putting out a meal for the evening dinner. “Quite a kitchen.”

Tommy came up beside him. “See that unit there on top of the stove?”

“What’s it do?”

“It’s a selector on the kitchen. It sets up a new combination every day. We don’t have to figure out what to eat.”

“Amazing.” Erickson glanced at Tommy. “You seem to be doing all right.”

Joan looked up from the vidscreen. “As well as could be expected.” Her voice was toneless, flat.

Erickson grunted. He walked back into the livingroom. “Well, I guess I’ll be running along.”

“What did you come for?” Joan asked.

“Nothing in particular, Mrs Clarke.” Erickson hesitated by the door, a big man, red-faced, in his late thirties. “Oh, there was one thing.”

“What is it?” Her voice was emotionless.

“Tom, have you made out your Sector Unit card?”

“My Sector Unit card!”

“According to law you’re supposed to be registered as part of this sector — *my* sector.” He reached in his pocket. “I have a few blank cards with me.”

“Gee!” Tommy said, a little frightened. “So soon? I thought it wasn’t until I got to be eighteen.”

“They’ve changed the ruling. We took quite a beating on Mars. Some of the sectors can’t fill their quotas. Have to dig deeper from now on.” Erickson grinned good-naturedly. “This is a good sector, you know. We have a lot of fun drilling and trying out the new equipment. I finally got

Washington to consign us a whole squadron of the new double-jet small fighters. Each man in my sector gets the use of a fighter."

Tommy's eyes lit up. "Really?"

"In fact the user gets to bring the fighter home over the weekend. You can park it on your lawn."

"No kidding?" Tommy sat down at the desk. He filled the Unit card out happily.

"Yes, we have a pretty good time," Erickson murmured.

"Between wars," Joan said quietly.

"What's that, Mrs Clarke?"

"Nothing."

Erickson accepted the filled-out card. He put it away in his wallet. "By the way," he said.

Tommy and Joan turned toward him.

"I guess you've been seeing the gleco-war on the vidscreen. I guess you know all about that."

"The gleco-war?"

"We get all our gleco from Callisto. It's made from the hides of some kind of animal. Well, there's been a little trouble with the natives. They claim —"

“What is a gleco?” Joan said tightly.

“That’s the stuff that makes your front door open for you only. It’s sensitive to your pressure pattern. Gleco is made from these animals.”

There was silence, the kind you can cut with a knife.

“I guess I’ll be going.” Erickson moved toward the door. “We’ll see you the next training session, Tom. Right?” He opened the door.

“Right,” Tommy murmured.

“Goodnight.” Erickson left, closing the door after him.

“But I *have* to go!” Tommy exclaimed.

“Why?”

“The whole sector is going. It’s required.”

Joan stared out the window. “It isn’t right.”

“But if I don’t go we’ll lose Callisto. And if we lose Callisto…”

“I know. Then we’ll have to go back to carrying door keys. Like our grandfathers did.”

“That’s right.” Tommy stuck out his chest, turning from side to side. “How do I look?”

Joan said nothing.

“How do I look? Do I look all right?”

Tommy looked fine in his deep green uniform. He was slim and straight, much better looking than Bob. Bob had been gaining weight. His hair had been thinning. Tommy's hair was thick and black. His cheeks were flushed with excitement, his blue eyes flashing. He pulled his helmet in place, snapping the strap.

"Okay?" he demanded.

Joan nodded. "Fine."

"Kiss me goodbye. I'm off to Callisto. I'll be back in a couple of days."

"Goodbye."

"You don't sound very happy."

"I'm not," Joan said. "I'm not very happy."

Tommy came back from Callisto all right but during the trektone-war on Europa something went wrong with his double-jet small fighter and the Sector Unit came back without him.

"Trektone," Bryan Erickson explained, "is used in vidscreen tubes. It's very important, Joan."

"I see."

"You know what the vidscreen means. Our whole education and information come over it. The kids learn from it. They get their schooling. And in the evening we use the pleasure-channels for entertainment. You don't want us to have to go back to —"

"No, no — of course not. I'm sorry." Joan waved a signal and the coffee table slid into the livingroom, bearing a pot of steaming coffee. "Cream?

Sugar?”

“Just sugar, thanks.” Erickson took his cup and sat silently on the couch, sipping and stirring. The house was quiet. It was late evening, about eleven o’clock. The shades were down. The vidscreen played softly in the corner. Outside the house the world was dark and unmoving except for a faint wind stirring among the cedar trees at the end of the grounds.

“Any news from the various fronts?” Joan asked after a while, leaning back and smoothing down her skirt.

“The fronts?” Erickson considered. “Well, some new developments in the iderium-war.”

“Where is that?”

“Neptune. We get our iderium from Neptune.”

“What is iderium used for?” Joan’s voice was thin and remote as if she were a long way off. Her face had a pinched look, a kind of strained whiteness. As if a mask had settled into place and remained, a mask through which she looked from a great distance.

“All the newspaper machines require iderium,” Erickson explained. “Iderium lining makes it possible for them to detect events as they occur and flash them over the vidscreen. Without iderium we’d have to go back to reporting news and writing it up by hand. That would introduce the personal bias. Slanted news. The iderium news machines are impartial.”

Joan nodded. “Any other news?”

“Not much more. They say some trouble might be going to break out on Mercury.”

“What do we get from Mercury?”

“That’s where our ambroline comes from. We use ambroline in all kinds of selector units. In your kitchen — the selector you have in there. The meal selector that sets up the food combinations. That’s an ambroline unit.”

Joan gazed vacantly into her coffee cup. “The natives on Mercury — they’re attacking us?”

“There’s been some riots, agitation, that sort of thing. Some Sector Units have been called out already. The Paris unit and the Moscow unit. Big units, I believe.”

After a time, Joan said, “You know, Bryan, I can tell you came here with something on your mind.”

“Oh, no. Why do you say that?”

“I can tell. What is it?”

Erickson flushed, his good-natured face red. “You’re pretty acute, Joan. As a matter of fact I did come for something.”

“What is it?”

Erickson reached into his coat and brought out a folded mimeographed paper. He passed it to Joan. “It isn’t my idea, understand. I’m just a cog in a big machine.” He chewed his lip nervously. “It’s because of the heavy losses in the trektone-war. They need to close ranks. They’re up against it, so I hear.”

“What does all this mean?” Joan passed the paper back. “I can’t make out all this legal wording.”

“Well, it means women are going to be admitted into Sector Units in the — in the absence of male members of the family.”

“Oh. I see.”

Erickson got up quickly, relieved that his duty had been done. “I guess I’ll have to run along now. I wanted to bring this over and show it to you. They’re handing them out all along the line.” He stuck the paper away in his coat again. He looked very tired.

“It doesn’t leave very many people, does it?”

“How do you mean?”

“Men first. Then children. Now women. It seems to take in everybody, just about.”

“Kind of does, I guess. Well, there must be a reason. We have to hold these fronts. The stuff must be kept coming in. We’ve got to have it.”

“I suppose so.” Joan rose slowly. “I’ll see you later on, Bryan.”

“Yes, I should be around later in the week. I’ll see you then.”

Bryan Erickson came back just as the nymphite-war was breaking out on Saturn. He grinned apologetically at Mrs Clarke as she let him in.

“Sorry to bother you so early in the morning,” Erickson said. “I’m in a big rush, running around all over the sector.”

“What is it?” Joan closed the door after him. He was in his Organizer’s uniform, pale green with silver bands across his shoulders. Joan was still in her dressing robe.

“Nice and warm in here,” Erickson said, warming his hands against the wall. Outside, the day was bright and cold. It was November. Snow lay over everything, a cold blanket of white. A few stark trees jutted up, their

branches barren and frozen. Far off along the highway the bright ribbon of surface cars had diminished to a trickle. There were few people going to the city, anymore. Most surface cars were in storage.

"I guess you know about the trouble on Saturn," Erickson murmured. "You've heard."

"I saw some shots, I think. Over the vidscreen."

"Quite a ruckus. Those Saturn natives are sure big. My golly, they must be fifty feet high."

Joan nodded absently, rubbing her eyes. "It's a shame we need anything from Saturn. Have you had breakfast, Bryan?"

"Oh, yes, thanks — I've eaten." Erickson turned his back to the wall. "Sure is good to get in out of the cold. You certainly keep your house nice and neat. I wish my wife kept our place this neat."

Joan crossed to the windows and let up the shades. "What do we use from Saturn?"

"It would have to be nymphite, of all things. Anything else we could give up. But not nymphite."

"What is nymphite used for?"

"All aptitude testing equipment. Without nymphite we wouldn't be able to tell who was fit for what occupation, including President of the World Council."

"I see."

“With nymphite testers we can determine what each person is good for and what kind of work he should be doing. Nymphite is the basic tool of modern society. With it we classify and grade ourselves. If anything should happen to the supply…”

“And it all comes from Saturn?”

“I’m afraid so. Now the natives are rioting, trying to take over the nymphite mines. It’s going to be a tough struggle. They’re big. The government is having to call up everyone it can get.”

Suddenly Joan gasped. “Everyone?” Her hand flew to her mouth. “Even women?”

“I’m afraid so. Sorry, Joan. You know it isn’t my idea. Nobody wanted to do it. But if we’re going to save all these things we have —”

“But whom will that leave?”

Erickson did not answer. He was sitting down at the desk, making out a card. He passed it to her. Joan took it automatically. “Your unit card.”

“But who will be left?” Joan asked again. “Can’t you tell me? Will anyone be left?”

The rocketship from Orion landed with a great crashing roar. Exhaust valves poured out clouds of waste material, as the jet compressors cooled into silence.

There was no sound for a time. Then the hatch was unscrewed carefully and swung inward. Cautiously N’tgari-3 stepped out, waving an atmosphere-testing cone ahead of him.

“Results?” his companion queried, his thoughts crossing to N’tgari-3.

“Too thin to breathe. For us. But enough for some kinds of life.” N’tgari-3 gazed around him, across the hills and plains, off in the distance. “Certainly is quiet.”

“Not a sound. Or any sign of life.” His companions emerged. “What’s that over there?”

“Where?” N’tgari-3 asked.

“Over that way.” Luci’n-6 pointed with his polar antenna. “See?”

“Looks like some kind of building units. Some sort of mass structure.”

The two Orionians raised their launch to hatch-level and slid it out onto the ground. With N’tgari-3 at the wheel they set off across the plain toward the raised spot visible on the horizon. Plants grew on all sides, some tall and sturdy, some fragile and small with multicolored blossoms.

“Plenty of immobile forms,” Luci’n-6 observed.

They passed through a field of gray-orange plants, thousands of stalks growing uniformly, endless plants all exactly alike.

“They look as if they were artificially sowed,” N’tgari-3 murmured.

“Slow the launch down. We’re coming to some sort of structure.”

N’tgari-3 slowed down the launch almost to a stop. The two Orionians leaned out the port, gazing in interest.

A lovely structure rose up, surrounded by plants of all kinds, tall plants, carpets of low plants, beds of plants with astonishing blossoms. The structure itself was neat and attractive, obviously the artifact of an advanced culture.

N’tgari-3 leaped out of the launch. “Maybe we’re about to encounter the legendary Beings from Terra.” He hurried across the carpet of plants, a long uniform ground-covering, up to the front porch of the structure.

Luci’n-6 followed him. They examined the door. “How does it open?” Luci’n-6 asked.

They burned a neat hole in the lock and the door slid back. Lights came on automatically. The house was warm, heated by the walls.

“How — how developed! How very advanced.”

They wandered from room to room, gazing around them at the vidscreen, at the elaborate kitchen, at the furniture in the bedroom, at the drapes, the chairs, the bed.

“But where are the Terrans?” N’tgari-3 said at last.

“They’ll be right back.”

N’tgari-3 paced back and forth. “This gives me an odd feeling. I can’t put my antenna on it. A sort of uncomfortable feeling.” He hesitated. “It isn’t possible they’re *not* coming back, is it?”

“Why not?”

Luci’n-6 began to fiddle with the vidscreen. “Hardly likely. We’ll wait for them. They’ll be back.”

N’tgari-3 peered out the window nervously. “I don’t see them. But they *must* be around. They couldn’t just walk off and leave all this behind. Where would they go? Why?”

“They’ll be back,” Luci’n-6 got some static on the vidscreen. “This isn’t very impressive.”

“I have a feeling they won’t.”

“If the Terrans don’t return,” Luci’n-6 said thoughtfully, fooling with the vidscreen controls, “it will be one of the greatest puzzles known to archaeology.”

“I’ll keep watching for them,” N’tgari-3 said impassively.

Martians Come in Clouds

Ted Barnes came in all grim-faced and trembling. He threw his coat and newspaper over the chair. “Another cloud,” he muttered. “A whole cloud of them! One was up on Johnson’s roof. They were getting it down with a long pole of some kind.”

Lena came and took his coat to the closet. “I’m certainly glad you hurried right on home.”

“I get the shakes when I see one of them.” Ted threw himself down on the couch, groping in his pockets for cigarettes. “Honest to God it really gets me.”

He lit up, blowing smoke around him in a gray mist. His hands were beginning to quiet down. He wiped sweat from his upper lip and loosened his necktie. “What’s for dinner?”

“Ham.” Lena bent over to kiss him.

“How come? Some sort of occasion?”

“No.” Lena moved back toward the kitchen door. “It’s that canned Dutch ham your mother gave us. I thought it was about time we opened it.”

Ted watched her disappear into the kitchen, slim and attractive in her bright print apron. He sighed, relaxing and leaning back. The quiet livingroom, Lena in the kitchen, the television set playing to itself in the corner, made him feel a little better.

He unlaced his shoes and kicked them off. The whole incident had taken only a few minutes but it had seemed much longer. An eternity — standing rooted to the sidewalk, staring up at Johnson’s roof. The crowd of shouting men. The long pole. And…

… and *it,* draped over the peak of the roof, the shapeless gray bundle evading the end of that pole. Creeping this way and that, trying to keep from being dislodged.

Ted shuddered. His stomach turned over. He had stood fixed to the spot, gazing up, unable to look away. Finally some fellow running past had stepped on his foot, breaking the spell and freeing him. He had hurried on, getting away as fast as he could, relieved and shaken. Lord… !

The back door slammed. Jimmy wandered into the livingroom, his hands in his pockets. “Hi, Dad.” He stopped by the bathroom door, looking across at his father. “What’s the matter? You’re all funny looking.”

“Jimmy, come over here.” Ted stubbed out his cigarette. “I want to talk to you.”

“I have to go wash for dinner.”

“Come here and sit down. Dinner can wait.” Jimmy came over and slid up onto the couch.

“What’s the matter? What is it?”

Ted studied his son. Round little face, tousled hair hanging down in his eyes. Smudge of dirt on one cheek. Jimmy was eleven. Was this a good time to tell him? Ted set his jaw grimly. Now was as good a time as any — while it was strong in his mind.

“Jimmy, there was a Martian up on Johnson’s roof. I saw it on the way home from the bus depot.”

Jimmy’s eyes grew round. “A buggie?”

“They were getting it with a pole. A cloud of them’s around. They come in clouds every few years.” His hands were beginning to shake again. He lit another cigarette. “Every two or three years. Not as often as they used to. They drift down from Mars in clouds, hundreds of them. All over the world — like leaves.” He shuddered. “Like a lot of dry leaves blowing down.”

“Gosh!” Jimmy said. He got off the couch onto his feet. “Is it still there?”

“No, they were getting it down. Listen,” Ted leaned toward the boy. “Listen to me — I’m telling you this so you’ll stay away from them. If you see one of them you turn around and run as fast as you can. You hear? Don’t go near it — stay away. Don’t…”

He hesitated. “Don’t pay any attention to it. You just turn around and run. Get somebody, stop the first man you see and tell him, then come on home. Do you understand?”

Jimmy nodded.

“You know what they look like. They showed you pictures at school. You must have —”

Lena came to the kitchen door. “Dinner’s ready. Jimmy, aren’t you washed?”

“I stopped him,” Ted said, getting up from the couch. “I wanted to have a talk with him.”

“You mind what your father tells you,” Lena said. “About the buggies — remember what he says or he’ll give you the biggest whipping you ever heard of.”

Jimmy ran to the bathroom. “I’ll get washed.” He disappeared, slamming the door behind him.

Ted caught Lena's gaze. "I hope they get them taken care of soon. I hate even to be outside."

"They should. I heard on television they're more organized than last time." Lena counted mentally. "This is the fifth time they've come. The fifth cloud. It seems to be tapering off. Not as often, any more. The first was in nineteen hundred and fifty-eight. The next in fifty-nine. I wonder where it'll end."

Jimmy hurried out of the bathroom. "Let's eat!"

"Okay," Ted said. "Let's eat."

It was a bright afternoon with the sun shining down everywhere. Jimmy Barnes rushed out of the school yard, through the gate and onto the sidewalk. His heart was hammering excitedly. He crossed over to Maple Street and then onto Cedar, running the whole way.

A couple of people were still poking around on Johnson's lawn — a policeman and a few curious men. There was a big ruined place in the center of the lawn, a sort of tear where the grass had been ripped back. The flowers all around the house had been trampled flat. But there was no sign whatsoever of the buggie.

While he was watching Mike Edwards came over and punched him on the arm. "What say, Barnes."

"Hi. Did you see it?"

"The buggie? No."

"My Dad saw it, coming home from work."

“Bull!”

“No, he really did. He said they were getting it down with a pole.”

Ralf Drake rode up on his bike. “Where is it? Is it gone?”

“They already tore it up,” Mike said. “Barnes says his old man saw it, coming home last night.”

“He said they were poking it down with a pole. It was trying to hang onto the roof.”

“They’re all dried-up and withered,” Mike said, “like something that’s been hanging out in the garage.”

“How do you know?” Ralf said.

“I saw one once.”

“Yeah. I’ll bet.”

They walked along the sidewalk, Ralf wheeling his bike, discussing the matter loudly. They turned down Vermont Street and crossed the big vacant lot.

“The TV announcer said most of them are already rounded up,” Ralf said. “There weren’t very many this time.”

Jimmy kicked a rock. “I’d sure like to see one before they get them all.”

“I’d sure like to *get* one,” Mike said.

Ralf sneered. “If you ever saw one you’d run so fast you wouldn’t stop until the sun set.”

“Oh, yeah?”

“You’d run like a fool.”

“The heck I would. I’d knock the ol’ buggie down with a rock.”

“And carry him home in a tin can?”

Mike chased Ralf around, out into the street and up to the corner. The argument continued endlessly all the way across town and over to the other side of the railroad tracks. They walked past the ink works and the Western Lumber Company loading platforms. The sun sank low in the sky. It was getting to be evening. A cold wind came up, blowing through the palm trees at the end of the Hartly Construction Company lot.

“See you,” Ralf said. He hopped on his bike, riding off. Mike and Jimmy walked back toward town together. At Cedar Street they separated.

“If you see a buggie give me a call,” Mike said.

“Sure thing.” Jimmy walked on up Cedar Street, his hands in his pockets. The sun had set. The evening air was chill. Darkness was descending.

He walked slowly, his eyes on the ground. The streetlights came on. A few cars moved along the street. Behind curtained windows he saw bright flashes of yellow, warm kitchens and livingrooms. A television set brayed out, rumbling into the gloom. He passed along the brick wall of the Pomeroy Estate. The wall turned into an iron fence. Above the fence great silent evergreens rose dark and unmoving in the evening twilight.

For a moment Jimmy stopped, kneeling down to tie his shoe. A cold wind blew around him, making the evergreens sway slightly. Far off a train sounded, a dismal wail echoing through the gloom. He thought about

dinner, Dad with his shoes off, reading the newspapers. His mother in the kitchen — the TV set murmuring to itself in the corner — the warm, bright livingroom.

Jimmy stood up. Above him in the evergreens something moved. He glanced up, suddenly rigid. Among the dark branches something rested, swaying with the wind. He gaped, rooted to the spot.

A buggie. Waiting and watching, crouched silently up in the tree.

It was *old.* He knew that at once. There was a dryness about it, an odor of age and dust. An ancient gray shape, silent and unmoving, wrapped around the trunk and branches of the evergreen. A mass of cobwebs, dusty strands and webs of gray wrapped and trailing across the tree. A nebulous wispy presence that made the hackles of his neck rise.

The shape began to move but so slowly he might not have noticed. It was sliding around the trunk, feeling its way carefully, a little at a time. As if it were sightless. Feeling its way inch by inch, an unseeing gray ball of cobwebs and dust.

Jimmy moved back from the fence. It was completely dark. The sky was black above him. A few stars glittered distantly, bits of remote fire. Far down the street a bus rumbled, turning a corner.

A buggie — clinging to the tree above him. Jimmy struggled, pulling himself away. His heart was thumping painfully, choking him. He could hardly breathe. His vision blurred, fading and receding. The buggie was only a little way from him, only a few yards above his head.

Help — he had to get help. Men with poles to push the buggie down — people — right away. He closed his eyes and pushed away from the fence. He seemed to be in a vast tide, a rushing ocean dragging at him, surging over his body, holding him where he was. He could not break away. He was caught. He strained, pushing against it. One step… another step… a third —

And then he heard it.

Or rather *felt* it. There was no sound. It was like drumming, a kind of murmuring like the sea, inside his head. The drumming lapped against his mind, beating gently around him. He halted. The murmuring was soft, rhythmic. But insistent — urgent. It began to separate, gaining form — form and substance. It flowed, breaking up into distinct sensations, images, scenes.

Scenes — of another world, *its* world. The buggie was talking to him, telling him about its world, spinning out scene after scene with anxious haste.

“Get away,” Jimmy muttered thickly.

But the scenes still came, urgently, insistently, lapping at his mind.

Plains — a vast desert without limit or end. Dark red, cracked and scored with ravines. A far line of blunted hills, dust-covered, corroded. A great basin off to the right, an endless empty piepan with white-crusted salt riming it, a bitter ash where water had once lapped.

“Get away!” Jimmy muttered again, moving a step back.

The scenes grew. Dead sky, particles of sand, whipped along, carried endlessly. Sheets of sand, vast billowing clouds of sand and dust, blowing endlessly across the cracked surface of the planet. A few scrawny plants growing by rocks. In the shadows of the mountains great spiders with old webs, dust-covered, spun centuries ago. Dead spiders, lodged in cracks.

A scene expanded. Some sort of artificial pipe, jutting up from the red-baked ground. A vent — underground quarters. The view changed. He was seeing below, down into the core of the planet — layer after layer of crumpled rock. A withered wrinkled planet without fire or life or moisture of any kind. Its skin cracking, its pulp drying out and blowing up in clouds

of dust. Far down in the core a tank of some sort — a chamber sunk in the heart of the planet.

He was inside the tank. Buggies were everywhere, sliding and moving around. Machines, construction of different kinds, buildings, plants in rows, generators, homes, rooms of complex equipment.

Sections of the tank were closed off — bolted shut. Rusty, metal doors — machinery sinking into decay — valves closed, pipes rusting away — dials cracked and broken. Lines clogged — teeth missing from gears — more and more sections closed. Fewer buggies — fewer and fewer…

The scene changed. Earth, seen from a long way off — a distant green sphere, turning slowly, cloud-covered. Broad oceans, blue water miles deep — moist atmosphere. The buggies drifting through empty reaches of space, drifting slowly toward Earth, year after year. Drifting endlessly in the dark wastes with agonizing slowness.

Now Earth expanded. The scene was almost familiar. An ocean surface, miles of foaming water, a few gulls above, a distant shore line. The ocean, Earth’s ocean. Clouds wandering above in the sky.

On the surface of the water flat spheres drifted, huge metal discs. Floating units, artificially built, several hundred feet around. Buggies rested silently on the discs, absorbing water and minerals from the ocean under them.

The buggie was trying to tell him something, something about itself. Discs on the water — the buggies wanted to use the water, to live on the water, on the surface of the ocean. Big surface discs, covered with buggies — it wanted him to know that, to see the discs, the water discs.

The buggies would live on the water, not on the land. Only the water — they wanted his permission. They wanted to use the water. That was what it was trying to tell him — that they wanted to use the surface of the water between the continents. Now the buggie was asking, imploring. It wanted to

know. It wanted him to say, to answer, to give his permission. It was waiting to hear, waiting and hoping — imploring…

The scenes faded, winking out of his mind. Jimmy stumbled back, falling against the curb. He leaped up again, wiping damp grass from his hands. He was standing in the gutter. He could still see the buggie resting among the branches of the evergreen. It was almost invisible. He could scarcely make it out.

The drumming had receded, left his mind. The buggie had withdrawn.

Jimmy turned and fled. He ran across the street and down the other side, sobbing for breath. He came to a corner and turned up Douglas Street. At the bus-stop stood a heavy-set man with a lunchbucket under his arm.

Jimmy ran up to the man. “A buggie. In the tree.” He gasped for breath. “In the big tree.”

The man grunted. “Run along, kid.”

“A buggie!” Jimmy’s voice rose in panic, shrill and insistent. “A buggie up in the tree!”

Two men loomed up out of the darkness. “What? A buggie?”

“Where?”

More people appeared. “Where is it?”

Jimmy pointed, gesturing. “Pomeroy Estate. The tree. By the fence.” He waved, gasping.

A cop appeared. “What’s going on?”

“The kid’s found a buggie. Somebody get a pole.”

“Show me where it is,” the cop said, grabbing hold of Jimmy’s arm. “Come on.”

Jimmy led them back down the street, to the brick wall. He hung back, away from the fence. “Up there.”

“Which tree?”

“That one — I think.”

A flashlight flicked on, picking its way among the evergreens. In the Pomeroy house lights came on. The front door opened.

“What’s going on there?” Mr Pomeroy’s voice echoed angrily.

“Got a buggie. Keep back.”

Mr Pomeroy’s door slammed quickly shut.

“*There* it is!” Jimmy pointed up. “*That* tree.” His heart almost stopped beating. “There. Up *there*!”

“Where?”

“I see it.” The cop moved back, his pistol out.

“You can’t shoot it. Bullets go right through.”

“Somebody get a pole.”

“Too high for a pole.”

“Get a torch.”

“Somebody bring a torch!”

Two men ran off. Cars were stopping. A police car slid to a halt, its siren whirring into silence. Doors opened, men came running over. A searchlight flashed on, dazzling them. It found the buggie and locked into place.

The buggie rested unmoving, hugging the branch of the evergreen. In the blinding light it looked like some giant cocoon clinging uncertainly to its place. The buggie began to move hesitantly, creeping around the trunk. Its wisps reached out, feeling for support.

“A torch, damn it! Get a torch here!”

A man came with a blazing board ripped from a fence. They poured gasoline over newspapers heaped in a ring around the base of the tree. The bottom branches began to burn, feebly at first, then more brightly.

“Get more gas!”

A man in a white uniform came lugging a tank of gasoline. He threw the tankful of gas onto the tree. Flames blazed up, rising rapidly. The branches charred and crackled, burning furiously.

Far above them the buggie began to stir. It climbed uncertainly to a higher branch, pulling itself up. The flames licked closer. The buggie increased its pace. It undulated, dragging itself onto the next branch above. Higher and higher it climbed.

“Look at it go.”

“It won’t get away. It’s almost at the top.”

More gasoline was brought. The flames leaped higher. A crowd had collected around the fence. The police kept them back.

“There it goes.” The light moved to keep the buggie visible.

“It’s at the top.”

The buggie had reached the top of the tree. It rested, holding onto the branch, swaying back and forth. Flames leaped from branch to branch, closer and closer to it. The buggie felt hesitantly around, blindly, seeking support. It reached, feeling with its wisps. A spurt of fire touched it.

The buggie crackled, smoke rising from it.

“It’s burning!” An excited murmur swept through the crowd. “It’s finished.”

The buggie was on fire. It moved clumsily, trying to get away. Suddenly it dropped, falling to the branch below. For a second it hung on the branch, crackling and smoking. Then the branch gave way with a rending crackle.

The buggie fell to the ground, among the newspapers and gasoline.

The crowd roared. They seethed toward the tree, flowing and milling forward.

“*Step* on it!”

“*Get* it!”

“*Step* on the damn thing!”

Boots stamped again and again, feet rising and falling, grinding the buggie into the ground. A man fell, pulling himself away, his glasses

hanging from one ear. Knots of struggling people fought with each other, pressing inward, trying to reach the tree. A flaming branch fell. Some of the crowd retreated.

"I *got* it!"

"Get *back!"*

More branches fell, crashing down. The crowd broke up, streaming back, laughing and pushing.

Jimmy felt the cop's hand on his arm, big fingers digging in. "That's the end, boy. It's all over."

"They get it?"

"They sure did. What's your name?"

"My name?" Jimmy started to tell the cop his name but just then some scuffling broke out between two men and the cop hurried over.

Jimmy stood for a moment, watching. The night was cold. A frigid wind blew around him, chilling him through his clothing. He thought suddenly of dinner and his father stretched out on the couch, reading the newspaper. His mother in the kitchen fixing dinner. The warmth, the friendly yellow homey warmth.

He turned and made his way through the people to the edge of the street. Behind him the charred stalk of the tree rose black and smoking into the night. A few glowing remains were being stamped out around its base. The buggie was gone, it was over, there was nothing more to see. Jimmy hurried home as if the buggie were chasing him.

"What do you say to that?" Ted Barnes demanded, sitting with his legs crossed, his chair back from the table. The cafeteria was full of noise and

the smell of food. People pushed their trays along on the racks in front of them, gathering dishes from the dispensers.

“Your kid really did that?” Bob Walters said, across from him, with open curiosity.

“You sure you’re not stringing us along?” Frank Hendricks said, lowering his newspaper for a moment.

“It’s the truth. The one they got over at the Pomeroy Estate — I’m talking about that one. It was a real son-of-a-gun.”

“That’s right,” Jack Green admitted. “The paper says some kid spotted it first and brought the police.”

“That was my kid,” Ted said, his chest swelling. “What do you guys think about that?”

“Was he scared?” Bob Walters wanted to know.

“Hell no!” Ted Barnes replied strongly.

“I’ll bet he was.” Frank Hendricks was from Missouri.

“He sure wasn’t. He got the cops and brought them to the place — last night. We were sitting around the dinner table, wondering where the hell he was. I was getting a little worried.” Ted Barnes was still the proud parent.

Jack Green got to his feet, looking at his watch. “Time to get back to the office.”

Frank and Bob got up also. “See you later, Ted.”

Green thumped Ted on the back. “Some kid you got, Barnes — chip off the old block.”

Ted grinned. “He wasn’t a bit afraid.” He watched them go out of the cafeteria onto the busy noonday street. After a moment he gulped down the rest of his coffee and wiped his chin, standing slowly up. “Not a damn bit afraid — not one damn bit.”

He paid for his lunch and pushed his way outside onto the street, his chest still swelled up. He grinned at people passing by as he walked back to the office, all aglow with reflected glory.

“Not a bit afraid,” he murmured, full of pride, a deep glowing pnde. “Not one damn bit!”

The Commuter

The little fellow was tired. He pushed his way slowly through the throng of people, across the lobby of the station, to the ticket window. He waited his turn impatiently, fatigue showing in his drooping shoulders, his sagging brown coat.

"Next," Ed Jacobson, the ticket seller, rasped.

The little fellow tossed a five dollar bill on the counter. "Give me a new commute book. Used up the old one." He peered past Jacobson at the wall clock. "Lord, is it really that late?"

Jacobson accepted the five dollars. "OK, mister. One commute book. Where to?"

"Macon Heights," the little fellow stated.

"Macon Heights." Jacobson consulted his board. "Macon Heights. There isn't any such place."

The little man's face hardened in suspicion. "You trying to be funny?"

"Mister, there isn't any Macon Heights. I can't sell you a ticket unless there is such a place."

"What do you mean? I live there!"

"I don't care. I've been selling tickets for six years and there is no such place."

The little man's eyes popped with astonishment. "But I have a home there. I go there every night. I —"

“Here.” Jacobson pushed him the chart board. “You find it.”

The little man pulled the board over to one side. He studied it frantically, his finger trembling as he went down the list of towns.

“Find it?” Jacobson demanded, resting his arms on the counter. “It’s not there, is it?”

The little man shook his head, dazed. “I don’t understand. It doesn’t make sense. Something must be wrong. There certainly must be —”

Suddenly he vanished. The board fell to the cement floor. The little fellow was gone — winked out of existence.

“Holy Caesar’s Ghost,” Jacobson gasped. His mouth opened and closed. There was only the board lying on the cement floor.

The little man had ceased to exist.

“What then?” Bob Paine asked.

“I went around and picked up the board.”

“He was really gone?”

“He was gone, all right.” Jacobson mopped his forehead. “I wish you had been around. Like a light he went out. Completely. No sound. No motion.”

Paine lit a cigarette, leaning back in his chair. “Had you ever seen him before?”

“No.”

“What time of day was it?”

“Just about now. About five.” Jacobson moved toward the ticket window. “Here comes a bunch of people.”

“Macon Heights.” Paine turned the pages of the State city guide. “No listing in any of the books. If he reappears I want to talk to him. Get him inside the office.”

“Sure. I don’t want to have nothing to do with him. It isn’t natural.” Jacobson turned to the window. “Yes, lady.”

“Two round trip tickets to Lewisburg.”

Paine stubbed his cigarette out and lit another. “I keep feeling I’ve heard the name before.” He got up and wandered over to the wall map. “But it isn’t listed.”

“There is no listing because there is no such place,” Jacobson said. “You think I could stand here daily, selling one ticket after another, and not know?” He turned back to his window. “Yes, sir.”

“I’d like a commute book to Macon Heights,” the little fellow said, glancing nervously at the clock on the wall. “And hurry it up.”

Jacobson closed his eyes. He hung on tight. When he opened his eyes again the little fellow was still there. Small wrinkled face. Thinning hair. Glasses. Tired, slumped coat.

Jacobson turned and moved across the office to Paine. “He’s back.” Jacobson swallowed, his face pale. “It’s him again.”

Paine’s eyes flickered. “Bring him right in.”

Jacobson nodded and returned to the window. “Mister,” he said, “could you please come inside?” He indicated the door. “The Vice-President would like to see you for a moment.”

The little man’s face darkened. “What’s up? The train’s about to take off.” Grumbling under his breath, he pushed the door open and entered the office. “This sort of thing has never happened before. It’s certainly getting hard to purchase a commute book. If I miss the train I’m going to hold your company —”

“Sit down,” Paine said, indicating the chair across from the desk. “You’re the gentleman who wants a commute book to Macon Heights?”

“Is there something strange about that? What’s the matter with all of you? Why can’t you sell me a commute book like you always do?”

“Like — like we *always* do?”

The little man held himself in check with great effort. “Last December my wife and I moved out to Macon Heights. I’ve been riding your train ten times a week, twice a day, for six months. Every month I buy a new commute book.”

Paine leaned toward him. “Exactly which one of our trains do you take, Mr —”

“Critchet. Ernest Critchet. The B train. Don’t you know your own schedules?”

“The B train?” Paine consulted a B train chart, running his pencil along it. No Macon Heights was listed. “How long is the trip? How long does it take?”

“Exactly forty-nine minutes.” Critchet looked up at the wall clock. “If I ever get on it.”

Paine calculated mentally. Forty-nine minutes. About thirty miles from the city. He got up and crossed to the big wall map. “What’s wrong?” Critchet asked with marked suspicion. Paine drew a thirty-mile circle on the map. The circle crossed a number of towns, but none of them was Macon Heights. And on the B line there was nothing at all.

“What sort of place is Macon Heights?” Paine asked. “How many people, would you say?”

“I don’t know. Five thousand, maybe. I spend most of my time in the city. I’m a bookkeeper over at Bradshaw Insurance.”

“Is Macon Heights a fairly new place?”

“It’s modern enough. We have a little two-bedroom house, a couple years old.” Critchet stirred restlessly. “How about a commute book?”

“I’m afraid,” Paine said slowly, “I can’t sell you a commute book.”

“What? Why not?”

“We don’t have any service to Macon Heights.”

Critchet leaped up. “What do you mean?”

“There’s no such place. Look at the map yourself.”

Critchet gaped, his face working. Then he turned angrily to the wall map, glaring at it intently.

“This is a curious situation, Mr Critchet,” Paine murmured. “It isn’t on the map, and the State city directory doesn’t list it. We have no schedule that includes it. There are no commute books made up for it. We don’t —”

He broke off. Critchet had vanished. One moment he was there, studying the wall map. The next moment he was gone. Vanished. Puffed out.

“Jacobson!” Paine barked. “He’s gone!”

Jacobson’s eyes grew large. Sweat stood out on his forehead. “So he is,” he murmured.

Paine was deep in thought, gazing at the empty spot Ernest Critchet had occupied. “Something’s going on,” he muttered. “Something damn strange.” Abruptly he grabbed his overcoat and headed for the door.

“Don’t leave me alone!” Jacobson begged.

“If you need me I’ll be at Laura’s apartment. The number’s some place in my desk.”

“This is no time for games with girls.”

Paine pushed open the door to the lobby. “I doubt,” he said grimly, “if this is a game.”

Paine climbed the stairs to Laura Nichols’s apartment two at a time. He leaned on the buzzer until the door opened.

“Bob!” Laura blinked in surprise. To what do I owe this —”

Paine pushed past her, inside the apartment. “Hope I’m not interrupting anything.”

“No, but —”

“Big doings. I’m going to need some help. Can I count on you?”

“On me?” Laura closed the door after him. Her attractively furnished apartment lay in half shadow. At the end of the deep green couch a single table lamp burned. The heavy drapes were pulled. The phonograph was on low in the corner.

“Maybe I’m going crazy.” Paine threw himself down on the luxuriant green couch. “That’s what I want to find out.”

“How can I help?” Laura came languidly over, her arms folded, a cigarette between her lips. She shook her long hair back out of her eyes. “Just what did you have in mind?”

Paine grinned at the girl appreciatively. “You’ll be surprised. I want you to go downtown tomorrow morning bright and early and —”

“Tomorrow morning! I have a job, remember? And the office starts a whole new string of reports this week.”

“The hell with that. Take the morning off. Go downtown to the main library. If you can’t get the information there, go over to the county courthouse and start looking through the back tax records. Keep looking until you find it.”

“It? Find what?”

Paine lit a cigarette thoughtfully. “Mention of a place called Macon Heights. I know I’ve heard the name before. Years ago. Got the picture? Go through the old atlases. Old newspapers in the reading room. Old magazines. Reports. City proposals. Propositions before the State legislature.”

Laura sat down slowly on the arm of the couch. “Are you kidding?”

“No.”

“How far back?”

“Maybe ten years — if necessary.”

“Good Lord! I might have to —”

“Stay there until you find it.” Paine got up abruptly. “I’ll see you later.”

“You’re leaving. You’re not taking me out to dinner?”

“Sorry.” Paine moved toward the door. “I’ll be busy. Real busy.”

“Doing what?”

“Visiting Macon Heights.”

Outside the train endless fields stretched off, broken by an occasional farm building. Bleak telephone poles jutted up toward the evening sky.

Paine glanced at his wristwatch. Not far, now. The train passed through a small town. A couple of gas stations, roadside stands, television store. It stopped at the station, brakes grinding. Lewisburg. A few commuters got off, men in overcoats with evening papers. The doors slammed and the train started up.

Paine settled back against his seat, deep in thought. Critchet had vanished while looking at the wall map. He had vanished the first time when Jacobson showed him the chart board… When he had been shown there was no such place as Macon Heights. Was there some sort of clue there? The whole thing was unreal, dreamlike.

Paine peered out. He was almost there — if there were such a place. Outside the train the brown fields stretched off endlessly. Hills and level fields. Telephone poles. Cars racing along the State highway, tiny black specks hurrying through the twilight.

But no sign of Macon Heights.

The train roared on its way. Paine consulted his watch. Fifty-one minutes had passed. And he had seen nothing. Nothing but fields.

He walked up the car and sat down beside the conductor, a white-haired old gentleman. “Ever hear of a place called Macon Heights?” Paine asked.

“No, sir.”

Paine showed his identification. “You’re sure you never heard of any place by that name?”

“Positive, Mr Paine.”

“How long have you been on this run?”

“Eleven years, Mr Paine.”

Paine rode on until the next stop, Jacksonville. He got off and transferred to a B train heading back to the city. The sun had set. The sky was almost black. Dimly, he could make out the scenery out there beyond the window.

He tensed, holding his breath. One minute to go. Forty seconds. Was there anything? Level fields. Bleak telephone poles. A barren, wasted landscape between towns,

Between? The train rushed on, hurtling through the gloom. Paine gazed out fixedly. Was there something out there? Something beside the fields?

Above the fields a long mass of translucent smoke lay stretched out. A homogeneous mass, extended for almost a mile. What was it? Smoke from the engine? But the engine was diesel. From a truck along the highway? A brush fire? None of the fields looked burned.

Suddenly the train began to slow. Paine was instantly alert. The train was stopping, coming to a halt. The brakes screeched, the cars lurched from side to side. Then silence.

Across the aisle a tall man in a light coat got to his feet, put his hat on, and moved rapidly toward the door. He leaped down from the train, onto the ground. Paine watched him, fascinated. The man walked rapidly away from the train across the dark fields. He moved with purpose, heading toward the bank of gray haze.

The man rose. He was walking a foot off the ground. He turned to the right. He rose again, now — three feet off the ground. For a moment he walked parallel to the ground, still heading away from the train. Then he vanished into the bank of haze. He was gone.

Paine hurried up the aisle. But already the train had begun gathering speed. The ground moved past outside. Paine located the conductor, leaning against the wall of the car, a pudding-faced youth.

“Listen,” Paine grated. “What was that stop!”

“Beg pardon, sir?”

“That stop! Where the hell were we?”

“We always stop there.” Slowly, the conductor reached into his coat and brought out a handful of schedules. He sorted through them and passed one to Paine. “The B always stops at Macon Heights. Didn’t you know that?”

“No!”

“It’s on the schedule.” The youth raised his pulp magazine again. “Always stops there. Always has. Always will.”

Paine tore the schedule open. It was true. Macon Heights was listed between Jacksonville and Lewisburg. Exactly thirty miles from the city.

The cloud of gray haze. The vast cloud, gaining form rapidly. As if something were coming into existence. As a matter of fact, something *was* coming into existence.

Macon Heights!

He caught Laura at her apartment the next morning. She was sitting at the coffee table in a pale pink sweater and dark slacks. Before her was a pile of notes, a pencil and eraser, and a malted milk.

“How did you make out?” Paine demanded.

“Fine. I got your information.”

“What’s the story?”

“There was quite a bit of material.” She patted the sheaf of notes. “I summed up the major parts for you.”

“Let’s have the summation.”

“Seven years ago this August the county board of supervisors voted on three new suburban housing tracts to be set up outside the city. Macon Heights was one of them. There was a big debate. Most of the city merchants opposed the new tracts. Said they would draw too much retail business away from the city.”

“Go on.”

“There was a long fight. Finally two of the three tracts were approved. Waterville and Cedar Groves. But not Macon Heights.”

“I see,” Paine murmured thoughtfully.

“Macon Heights was defeated. A compromise; two tracts instead of three. The two tracts were built up right away. You know. We passed through Waterville one afternoon. Nice little place.”

“But no Macon Heights.”

“No. Macon Heights was given up.”

Paine rubbed his jaw. “That’s the story, then.”

“That’s the story. Do you realize I lose a whole half-day’s pay because of this? You *have* to take me out, tonight. Maybe I should get another fellow. I’m beginning to think you’re not such a good bet.”

Paine nodded absently. “Seven years ago.” All at once a thought came to him. “The vote! How close was the vote on Macon Heights?”

Laura consulted her notes. “The project was defeated by a single vote.”

“A single vote. Seven years ago.” Paine moved out into the hall. Thanks, honey. Things are beginning to make sense. Lots of sense!”

He caught a cab out front. The cab raced him across the city, toward the train station. Outside, signs and streets flashed by. People and stores and cars.

His hunch had been correct. He *had* heard the name before. Seven years ago. A bitter county debate on a proposed suburban tract. Two towns approved; one defeated and forgotten.

But now the forgotten town was coming into existence — seven years later. The town and an undetermined slice of reality along with it. *Why?* Had something changed in the past? Had an alteration occurred in some past continuum?

That seemed like the explanation. The vote had been close. Macon Heights had *almost* been approved. Maybe certain parts of the past were unstable. Maybe that particular period, seven years ago, had been critical. Maybe it had never completely “jelled”. An odd thought: the past changing, after it had already happened.

Suddenly Paine’s eyes focused. He sat up quickly. Across the street was a store sign, halfway along the block. Over a small, inconspicuous establishment. As the cab moved forward Paine peered to see.

BRADSHAW INSURANCE

[OR]

NOTARY PUBLIC

He pondered. Critchet’s place of business. Did it also come and go? Had it always been there? Something about it made him uneasy.

“Hurry it up,” Paine ordered the driver. “Let’s get going.”

When the train slowed down at Macon Heights, Paine got quickly to his feet and made his way up the aisle to the door. The grinding wheels jerked to a halt and Paine leaped down onto the hot gravel siding. He looked around him.

In the afternoon sunlight, Macon Heights glittered and sparkled, its even rows of houses stretching out in all directions. In the center of the town the marquee of the theater rose up.

A theater, even. Paine headed across the track toward the town. Beyond the train station was a parking lot. He stepped up onto the lot and crossed it, following a path past a filling station and onto a sidewalk.

He came out on the main street of the town. A double row of stores stretched out ahead of him. A hardware store. Two drugstores. A dime store. A modern department store.

Paine walked along, hands in his pockets, gazing around him at Macon Heights. An apartment building stuck up, tall and fat. A janitor was washing down the front steps. Everything looked new and modern. The houses, the stores, the pavement and sidewalks. The parking meters. A brown-uniformed cop was giving a car a ticket. Trees, growing at intervals. Neatly clipped and pruned.

He passed a big supermarket. Out in front was a bin of fruit, oranges and grapes. He picked a grape and bit into it.

The grape was real, all right. A big black concord grape, sweet and ripe. Yet twenty-four hours ago there had been nothing here but a barren field.

Paine entered one of the drugstores. He leafed through some magazines and then sat down at the counter. He ordered a cup of coffee from the red-cheeked little waitress.

“This is a nice town,” Paine said, as she brought the coffee.

“Yes, isn’t it?”

Paine hesitated. “How — how long have you been working here?”

“Three months.”

“Three months?” Paine studied the buxom little blonde. “You live here in Macon Heights?”

“Oh, yes.”

“How long?”

“A couple of years, I guess.” She moved away to wait on a young soldier who had taken a stool down the counter.

Paine sat drinking his coffee and smoking, idly watching the people passing by outside. Ordinary people. Men and women, mostly women. Some had grocery bags and little wire carts. Automobiles drove slowly back and forth. A sleepy little suburban town. Modern, upper middle-class. A quality town. No slums here. Small, attractive houses. Stores with sloping grass fronts and neon signs.

Some high school kids burst into the drugstore, laughing and bumping into each other. Two girls in bright sweaters sat down next to Paine and ordered lime drinks. They chatted gaily, bits of their conversation drifting to him.

He gazed at them, pondering moodily. They were real, all right. Lipstick and red fingernails. Sweaters and armloads of school books. Hundreds of high school kids, crowding eagerly into the drugstore.

Paine rubbed his forehead wearily. It didn’t seem possible. Maybe he was out of his mind. The town was *real.* Completely real. It must have always existed. A whole town couldn’t rise up out of nothing; out of a cloud of gray haze. Five thousand people, houses and streets and stores.

Stores. Bradshaw Insurance.

Stabbing realization chilled him. Suddenly he understood. It was spreading. Beyond Macon Heights. Into the city. The city was changing, too. Bradshaw Insurance. Crichet’s place of business.

Macon Heights couldn’t exist without warping the city. They interlocked. The five thousand people came from the city. Their jobs. Their lives. The city was involved.

But how much? How much was the city changing?

Paine threw a quarter on the counter and hurried out of the drugstore, toward the train station. He had to get back to the city. Laura, the change. Was she still there? Was his *own* life safe?

Fear gripped him. Laura, all his possessions, his plans, hopes and dreams. Suddenly Macon Heights was unimportant. His own world was in jeopardy. Only one thing mattered now. He had to make sure of it; make sure his own life was still there. Untouched by the spreading circle of change that was lapping out from Macon Heights.

“Where to, buddy?” the cabdriver asked, as Paine came rushing out of the train station.

Paine gave him the address of the apartment. The cab roared out into traffic. Paine settled back nervously. Outside the window the streets and office buildings flashed past. White collar workers were already beginning to get off work, swelling out onto the sidewalks to stand in clumps at each corner.

How much had changed? He concentrated on a row of buildings. The big department store. Had that always been there? The little boot-black shop next to it. He had never noticed that before.

MORRIS HOME FURNISHINGS.

He didn’t remember *that.* But how could he be sure? He felt confused. How could he tell?

The cab let him off in front of the apartment house. Paine stood for a moment, looking around him. Down at the end of the block the owner of the Italian delicatessen was out putting up the awning. Had he ever noticed a delicatessen there before?

He could not remember.

What had happened to the big meat market across the street? There was nothing but neat little houses; older houses that looked like they'd been there plenty long. Had a meat market ever been there? The houses *looked* solid.

In the next block the striped pole of a barbershop glittered. Had there always been a barbershop there?

Maybe it had always been there. Maybe, and maybe not. Everything was shifting. New things were coming into existence, others going away. The past was altering, and memory was tied to the past. How could he trust his memory? How could he be sure?

Terror gripped him. Laura. His world…

Paine raced up the front steps and pushed open the door of the apartment house. He hurried up the carpeted stairs to the second floor. The door of the apartment was unlocked. He pushed it open and entered, his heart in his mouth, praying silently.

The livingroom was dark and silent. The shades were half pulled. He glanced around wildly. The light blue couch, magazines on its arms. The low blond-oak table. The television set. But the room was empty.

"Laura!" he gasped.

Laura hurried from the kitchen, eyes wide with alarm. “Bob! What are you doing home? Is anything the matter?”

Paine relaxed, sagging with relief. “Hello, honey.” He kissed her, holding her tight against him. She was warm and substantial; completely real. “No, nothing’s wrong. Everything’s fine.”

“Are you sure?”

“I’m sure.” Paine took off his coat shakily and dropped it over the back of the couch. He wandered around the room, examining things, his confidence returning. His familiar blue couch, cigarette burns on its arms. His ragged footstool. His desk where he did his work at night. His fishing rods leaning up against the wall behind the bookcase.

The big television set he had purchased only last month; that was safe, too.

Everything, all he owned, was untouched. Safe. Unharmed.

“Dinner won’t be ready for half an hour,” Laura murmured anxiously, unfastening her apron. “I didn’t expect you home so early. I’ve just been sitting around all day. I did clean the stove. Some salesman left a sample of a new cleaner.”

“That’s okay.” He examined a favorite Renoir print on the wall. “Take your time. It’s good to see all these things again. I —”

From the bedroom a crying sound came. Laura turned quickly. “I guess we woke up Jimmy.”

“Jimmy?”

Laura laughed. “Darling, don’t you remember your own son?”

“Of course,” Paine murmured, annoyed. He followed Laura slowly into the bedroom. “Just for a minute everything seemed strange.” He rubbed his forehead, frowning. “Strange and unfamiliar. Sort of out of focus.”

They stood by the crib, gazing down at the baby. Jimmy glared back up at his mother and dad.

“It must have been the sun,” Laura said. “It’s so terribly hot outside.”

“That must be it. I’m okay now.” Paine reached down and poked at the baby. He put his arm around his wife, hugging her to him. “It must have been the sun,” he said. He looked down into her eyes and smiled.

The World She Wanted

Half-dozing, Larry Brewster contemplated the litter of cigarette-butts, empty beer-bottles, and twisted match-folders heaped on the table before him. He reached out and adjusted one beer-bottle — thereby achieving just the right effect.

In the back of the *Wind-Up* the small dixieland jazz combo played noisily. The harsh jazz-sound mixed with the murmur of voices, the semi-darkness, the clink of glasses at the bar. Larry Brewster sighed in happy contentment. “This,” he stated, “is Nirvana.” He nodded his head slowly, agreeing with the words uttered. “Or at least the seventh level of zen-buddhist heaven.”

“There aren’t seven levels in the zen-buddhist heaven,” a competent female voice corrected, from directly above him.

“That’s a fact,” Larry admitted, reflecting on the matter. “I was speaking metaphorically, not literally.”

“You should be more careful; you should mean exactly what you say.”

“And say exactly what you mean?” Larry peered up. “Have I had the pleasure of knowing you, young lady?”

The slender, golden-haired girl dropped into the seat across the table from Larry, her eyes sharp and bright in the half-gloom of the bar. She smiled at him, white teeth sparkling. “No,” she said. “We’ve never met; our time has just now arrived.”

“Our — our time?” Larry drew himself up slowly, pulling his lanky frame together. There was something in the girl’s bright, competent face that vaguely alarmed him, penetrating his alcoholic haze. Her smile was too

calm, too assured. “Just exactly what do you mean?” Larry murmured. “What’s this all about?”

The girl slipped out of her coat, revealing full, rounded breasts and a supple figure. “I’ll have a martini,” she said. “And by the way — my name is Allison Holmes.”

“Larry Brewster.” Larry studied the girl intently. “What did you say you wanted?”

“A martini. Dry.” Allison smiled coolly across at him. “And get one for yourself, why don’t you?”

Larry grunted under his breath. He signaled to the waiter. “A dry martini, Max.”

“Okay, Mr Brewster.”

A few minutes later Max returned and set a martini glass on the table. When he had gone, Larry leaned toward the blonde-haired girl. “Now, Miss Holmes —”

“None for you?”

“None for me.” Larry watched her sip her drink. Her hands were small and dainty. She wasn’t bad-looking, but he didn’t like the self-satisfied calmness in her eyes. “What’s this business about our time having come? Let me in on it.”

“It’s very simple. I saw you sitting here and I knew you were the one. In spite of the messy table.” She wrinkled her nose at the litter of bottles and match-folders. “Why don’t you have them clear it off?”

“Because I enjoy it. You knew I was the one? Which one?” Larry was getting interested. “Go on.”

“Larry, this is a very important moment in my life.” Allison gazed around her. “Who would think I’d find you in a place like this? But that’s the way it’s always been for me. This is only one link of a great chain going back — well, as far back as I can remember.”

“What chain is that?”

Allison laughed. “Poor Larry. You don’t understand.” She leaned toward him, her lovely eyes dancing. “You see, Larry, I know something no one else knows — no one else in this world. Something I learned when I was a little girl. Something —”

“Wait a minute. What do you mean by ‘this world’? You mean there are nicer worlds than this? Better worlds? Like in Plato? This world is only a —”

“Certainly not!” Allison frowned. “This is the best world, Larry. The best of all possible worlds.”

“Oh. Herbert Spencer.”

“The best of all possible worlds — for me.” She smiled at him, a cold, secret smile.

“Why for you?”

There was something almost predatory in the girl’s finely-chiseled face as she answered. “Because,” she said calmly, “this is *my* world.”

Larry raised an eyebrow. “Your world?” Then he grinned good-naturedly. “Sure it is, baby; it belongs to all of us.” He waved expansively around at the room. “Your world, my world, the banjo player’s world —”

“No.” Allison shook her head firmly. “No, Larry. My world; it belongs to me. Everything and everybody. All mine.” She moved her chair around until she was close by him. He could smell her perfume, warm and sweet and tantalizing. “Don’t you understand? This is mine. All these things — they’re here for me; for my happiness.”

Larry edged away a little. “Oh? You know, as a philosophical tenet that’s a bit hard to maintain. I’ll admit Descartes said the world is known to us only through our senses, and our senses reflect our own —”

Allison laid her small hand on his arm. “I don’t mean that. You see, Larry, there are *many* worlds. All kinds of worlds. Millions and millions. As many worlds as there are people. Each person has his own world, Larry, his own private world. A world that exists for him, for his happiness.” She lowered her gaze modestly. “This happens to be *my* world.”

Larry considered. “Very interesting, but what about other people? Me, for example.”

“You exist for my happiness, of course; that’s what I’m talking about.” The pressure of her small hand increased. “As soon as I saw you, I knew you were the one. I’ve been thinking about this for several days now. It’s time *he* came along. The man for me. The man intended for me to marry — so my happiness can be complete.”

“Hey!” Larry exclaimed, drawing back.

“What’s wrong?”

“What about *me?”* Larry demanded. “That’s not fair! Doesn’t *my* happiness count?”

“Yes… but not here, not in this world.” She gestured vaguely. “You have a world someplace else, a world of your own; in this world you’re merely a part of my life. You’re not completely real. I’m the only one in this

world who's *completely* real. All the rest of you are here for me. You're just — just *partly* real."

"I see." Larry sat back slowly, rubbing his jaw. "Then I sort of exist in a lot of different worlds. A little bit here, a little bit there, according to where I'm needed. Like now, for instance, in this world. I've been wandering around for twenty-five years, just so I could turn up when you needed me."

"That's right." Allison's eyes danced merrily; "you have the idea." Suddenly she glanced at her wristwatch. "It's getting late. We better go."

"Go?"

Allison stood up quickly, picking up her tiny purse and pulling her coat around her. "I want to do so many things with you, Larry! So many places to see! So much to do!" She took hold of his arm. "Come on. Hurry up."

Larry rose slowly. "Say, listen —"

"We're going to have lots of fun." Allison steered him toward the door. "Let's see… What would be nice…"

Larry halted angrily. "The check! I can't just walk out." He fumbled in his pocket. "I owe about —"

"No check; not tonight. This is my special night." Allison spun toward Max, cleaning up the vacated table. "Isn't that right?"

The old waiter looked up slowly. "What's that, Miss?"

"No check tonight."

Max shook his head. "No check tonight, Miss. The boss's birthday; drinks on the house."

Larry gaped. “What?”

“Come on.” Allison tugged at him, pulling him through the heavy plush doors, out onto the cold, dark New York sidewalk. “Come on, Larry — we have so much to do!”

Larry murmured, “I still don’t know where that cab came from.”

The cab drove off, racing away down the street. Larry looked around. Where were they? The dark streets were silent and deserted.

“First,” Allison Holmes said, “I want a corsage. Larry, don’t you think you should present your fiancée with a corsage? I want to go in looking nice.”

“A corsage? At this time of night?” Larry gestured at the dark, silent streets. “Are you kidding?”

Allison pondered, then she crossed the street, abruptly; Larry followed after her. Allison came up to a closed-up flower shop, its sign off, door locked. She rapped with a coin on the plate glass window.

“Have you gone crazy?” Larry cried. “There’s nobody in there, this time of night!”

In the back of the flower shop somebody stirred. An old man came slowly toward the window, removing his glasses and putting them in his pocket. He bent down and unlocked the door. “What is it, lady?”

“I want a corsage, the best you have.” Allison pushed into the shop, gazing around at the flowers in awe.

“Forget it, buddy,” Larry murmured; “don’t pay any attention to her. She’s —”

“That’s all right.” The old man sighed. “I was going over my income tax; I can use a break. There should be some already made up. I’ll open the refrigerator.”

Five minutes later they were out on the street again, Allison gazing ecstatically down at the great orchid pinned to her coat. “It’s beautiful, Larry!” she whispered. She squeezed his arm, gazing up in his face. “Thanks a lot; now, let’s go.”

“Where? Maybe you found an old guy sweating over his tax returns at one o’clock in the morning, but I defy you to find anything else in this god-forsaken graveyard.”

Allison looked around. “Let’s see… Over this way. This big old house over here. I wouldn’t be a bit surprised —” She tugged Larry down the sidewalk, her high heels clattering in the night silence.

“All right,” Larry murmured, grinning a little. “I’ll go along with you; this ought to be interesting.”

No light showed in the great square house; all the shades were down. Allison hurried down the walk, feeling her way through the darkness, up onto the porch of the house.

“Hey!” Larry exclaimed, suddenly alarmed. Allison had taken hold of the doorknob; she pushed the door open.

A burst of light struck them, light and sound. The murmur of voices. Past a heavy curtain people moved, an immense room of people. Men and women in evening dress, bending over long tables and counters.

“Oh, oh,” Larry muttered. “Now you’ve got us into it; this is no place for us.”

Three tough-looking gorillas come strolling over, their hands in their pockets. “Okay, mister; let’s go.”

Larry started out. “That’s fine by me. I’m an easy-going person.”

“Nonsense.” Allison caught hold of his arm, her eyes glittering with excitement. “I always wanted to visit a gambling-place. Look at all the tables! What are they doing? What’s that over there?”

“For Lord’s sake,” Larry gasped desperately. “Let’s get out of here. These people don’t know us.”

“You bet we don’t,” one of the three hulking bruisers rasped. He nodded to his companions. “Here we go.” They grabbed hold of Larry and propelled him toward the door.

Allison blinked. “What are you doing to him? You stop that!” She concentrated, her lips moving. “Let me — let me talk to *Connie*.”

The three bruisers froze. They turned toward her slowly. “To *who?* Who did you say, lady?”

Allison smiled up at them. “To Connie — I think. Isn’t that what I said? Connie. Where is he?” She looked around. “Is that him over there?”

A small dapper man at one of the tables turned resentfully at his name, his face twisting with annoyance.

“Let it go, lady,” one of the bruisers said quickly. “Don’t bother Connie; he don’t like to be bothered.” He closed the door, pushing Larry and Allison past the curtain, into the big room. “You go and play. Enjoy yourselves; have a good time.”

Larry looked down at the girl beside him. He shook his head weakly. “I could sure use a drink — a stiff one.”

“All right,” Allison said happily, her eyes fastened on the roulette table. “You go have your drink. I’m going to start playing!”

After a couple of good stiff scotch-and-waters, Larry slid off the stool and wandered away from the bar, over toward the roulette table in the center of the room.

A big crowd had collected around the table. Larry closed his eyes, steadying himself; he knew already. After he had gathered his strength he pushed his way through the people and up to the table.

“What does this one mean?” Allison was asking the croupier, holding up a blue chip. In front of her was an immense stack of chips — all colors. Everyone was murmuring and talking and looking at her.

Larry made his way over to her. “How are you getting along? Lost your dowry yet?”

“Not yet. According to this man, I’m ahead.”

“He should know,” Larry sighed wearily; “he’s in the business.”

“Do you want to play, too?” Allison asked, accepting an armload of chips. “You can have these. I’ve got more.”

“I see that. But — no, thanks; it’s out of my line. Come on.” Larry led her away from the table. “I think the time has come for you and me to have a little chat. Over in the corner where it’s quiet.”

“A chat?”

“I got to thinking about it; this thing has gone far enough.”

Allison trailed after him. Larry strode over to the side of the room. In a huge fireplace, a roaring fire blazed. Larry threw himself down in a deep chair, pointing to the chair next to it. “Sit,” Larry said.

Allison sat down, crossing her legs and smoothing down her skirt. She leaned back, sighed. “Isn’t this nice? The fire and everything? Just what I always imagined.” She closed her eyes dreamily.

Larry took his cigarettes out and lit up slowly, deep in thought. “Now look here, Miss Holmes —”

“Allison. After all, we’re going to be married.”

“Allison, then. Look here, Allison, this whole thing is absurd. While I was at the bar I got to thinking it over. It isn’t right, this crazy theory of yours.”

“Why not?” Her voice was sleepy, far-off.

Larry gestured angrily. “I’ll tell you why not. You claim I’m only *partly* real. Isn’t that right? You’re the only one who’s completely real.”

Allison nodded. “That’s right.”

“But look! I don’t know about all these other people —” Larry waved at them deprecatingly. “Maybe you’re right about them. Maybe they *are* only phantoms. But not me! You can’t say I’m just a phantom.” He banged his fist against the arm of the chair. “See? You call that just partly real?”

“The chair’s only partly real, too.”

Larry groaned. “Damn it. I’ve been in this world twenty-five years, and I just met you a few hours ago. Am I supposed to believe I’m not really alive? Not really — not really me? That I’m only a sort of — a hunk of scenery in your world? Part of the fixtures?”

“Larry, darling. You *have* your own world. We each have our own world. But this one happens to be mine, and you’re in it for me.” Allison opened her large blue eyes. “In your real world I may exist a little for you, too. All our worlds overlap, darling; don’t you see? You exist for me in my world. Probably I exist for you in yours.” She smiled. The Great Designer has to be economical — like all good artists. Many of the worlds are similar, almost the same. But each of them belongs to only one person.”

“And this one is yours.” Larry let his breath out with a sigh. “Okay, baby. You have your mind made up; I’ll play along with you — for a while, at least. I’ll string along.” He contemplated the girl leaning back in the deep chair next to him. “You know, you’re not bad-looking, not bad at all.”

“Thank you.”

“Yeah, I’ll bite. For a while, at least. Maybe we *are* meant for each other. But you’ve got to calm down a little; you try your luck too hard. If you’re going to be around me, you better take it a little easier.”

“What do you mean, Larry?”

“All this. This place. What if the cops come? Gambling. Running around.” Larry gazed off into the distance. “No, this isn’t right. This isn’t the kind of life I’ve got pictured. You know what I see in my mind’s eye?” Larry’s face lit up with wistful pleasure. “I see a little house, baby. Out in the country. Way out. The farm country. Flat fields. Maybe Kansas. Colorado. A little cabin. With a well. And cows.”

Allison frowned. “Oh?”

“And you know what else? Me, out in the back. Farming. Or — or feeding the chickens. Ever fed chickens?” Larry shook his head happily. “A lot of fun, baby. And squirrels. Ever walk in the park and feed squirrels? Gray squirrels, big long tails? Tails as long as the squirrels.”

Allison yawned. Abruptly she got to her feet, picking up her purse. “I think it’s time we ran along.”

Larry got up slowly. “Yeah, I guess it is.”

“Tomorrow is going to be a busy day. I want to get started early.” Allison made her way through the people, toward the door. “First of all, I think we should begin looking for —”

Larry stopped her. “Your chips.”

“What?”

“Your chips. Turn them in.”

“What for?”

“For money — I think they call it now.”

“Oh, bother.” Allison turned to a heavy-set man sitting at the black-jack table. “Here!” She dumped the chips in the man’s lap. “You take them. All right, Larry. Let’s go!”

The cab pulled up in front of Larry’s apartment.

“Is this where you live?” Allison asked, gazing up at the building. “It’s not very modern, is it?”

“No.” Larry pushed the door open. “And the plumbing isn’t very good, either. But what the hell.”

“Larry?” Allison stopped him as he started to get out.

“Yes?”

“You won’t forget about tomorrow, will you?”

“Tomorrow?”

“We have so much to do. I want you to be up bright and early, ready to go places. So we can get things done.”

“How about six o’clock in the evening? Is that early enough?” Larry yawned. It was late, and cold.

“Oh, no. I’ll be by for you at ten a.m.”

“Ten! But my job. I got to work!”

“Not tomorrow. Tomorrow is *our* day.”

“How the hell am I going to live if I don’t —”

Allison reached up, putting her slender arms around him. “Don’t worry; it’ll be all right. Remember? This is my world.” She pulled him down to her, kissing him on the mouth. Her lips were sweet and cool. She held onto him tightly, her eyes closed.

Larry broke away. “All right, already.” He straightened his tie, standing up on the pavement.

“Tomorrow, then. And don’t worry about your old job. Goodbye, Larry darling.” Allison slammed the door. The cab drove off down the dark street. Larry gazed after it, still dazed. Finally he shrugged and turned toward the apartment house.

Inside, on the table in the hall, was a letter for him. He scooped it up, opening it as he climbed the stairs. The letter was from his office, Bray Insurance Company. The annual vacation schedule for the staff, listing the two weeks doled out to each employee. He didn't even have to find his name to know when *his* began.

"Don't worry ," Allison had said.

Larry grinned ruefully, stuffing the letter in his coat pocket. He unlocked his apartment door. Ten o'clock did she say? Well, at least he would have a good night's sleep.

The day was warm and bright. Larry Brewster sat out on the front steps of the apartment building, smoking and thinking while he waited for Allison.

She was doing all right; no doubt about that. A hell of a lot of things seemed to fall like ripe plums into her lap. No wonder she thought it was her world… She was getting the breaks, all right. But some people were like that. Lucky. Walked into fortune every time; won on quiz shows; found money in the gutter; bet on the right horse. It happened.

Her world? Larry grinned. Apparently Allison really believed it. Interesting. Well, he'd string along with her a little while longer, at least; she was a nice kid.

A horn sounded, and Larry glanced up. A two-tone convertible was parked in front of him, the top down. Allison waved. "Hi! Come on!"

Larry got up and came over. "Where did you get this?" He opened the door and slid in slowly.

"This?" Allison started the car up. It zoomed out into traffic. "I forget; I think someone gave it to me."

“You forget!” He stared at her. Then he relaxed against the soft seat. “Well? What’s first on the list?”

“We’re going to look at our new house.”

“Whose new house?”

“Ours. Yours and mine.”

Larry sank down into the seat. “What! But you —”

Allison spun the car around a corner. “You’ll love it; it’s nice. How big is your apartment?”

“Three rooms.”

Allison laughed merrily. “This is eleven rooms. Two stories. Half an acre. Or so they tell me.”

“Haven’t you seen it?”

“Not yet. My lawyer just called me this morning.”

“Your lawyer?”

“It’s part of an estate left to me.”

Larry pulled himself together slowly. Allison, in a scarlet two-piece outfit, gazed happily at the road ahead, her small face blank and contented. “Let me get all this straight. You’ve never seen it; your lawyer just called you; you get it as part of an estate.”

“That’s right. Some old uncle of mine. I forget his name. I didn’t expect him to leave me anything.” She turned toward Larry, beaming warmly at

him. “But this is such a special time for me. It’s important that *everything* go right. My whole world…”

“Yeah. Your whole world. Well, I hope you like the house after you see it.”

Allison laughed. “I will. After all, it exists for me; that’s what it’s there for.”

“You’ve got this worked out like an exact science,” Larry murmured. “Everything that happens to you is for the best. You’re pleased with everything. So it *must* be your world. Maybe you’re just making the best of things — telling yourself you really like the things that happen to you.”

“Do you think so?”

He frowned in thought as they zipped along. “Tell me,” he said finally, “how did you learn about these multiple worlds? Why are you so sure this one is yours?”

She smiled at him. “I worked it out myself,” she said. “I studied logic and philosophy, and history — and there was always something that puzzled me. Why were there so many vital changes in the fortunes of people and nations that seemed to come about providentially, just at the right moment? Why did it really seem as if my world had to be just the way it was, so that all through history, strange things happened which make it work out that way?

“I’d heard the ‘This Is the Best of All Possible Worlds’ theory, but it didn’t make sense the way I read about it. I studied the religions of mankind, and scientific speculations of the existence of a Creator — but something was lacking, something which either couldn’t be accounted for, or was just overlooked.”

Larry nodded. “Well, sure. It’s easy; if this is the best of all possible worlds, then why is there so much suffering — unnecessary suffering — in it, if there’s a benevolent and all-powerful Creator, as so many millions have believed, do believe, and will believe in the future, no doubt, then how do you account for the existence of evil?” He grinned at her. “And you worked out the answer to all that, eh — just tossed it off like a martini?”

Allison sniffed. “You don’t have to put it that way… Well, it *is* simple and I’m not the only one who’s figured it out, although obviously I’m the only one in *this* world…”

“Okay,” Larry broke in, “I’ll hold back objections until you’ve told me how you did it.”

“Thank you, darling,” she said. “You see, you *are* understanding — even if you don’t agree with me right off the bat… Well, that would get tiresome, I’m sure. It’s much more fun if I have to work to convince you… Oh, don’t get impatient, I’ll come to the point.”

“Thank you,” he said.

“It’s simple, like the egg-trick, once you know the angle. The reason why both the benevolent Creator *and* the ‘Best of All Possible Worlds’ theory seem to bog down is because we start out with an unjustified assumption — that this is the *only* world. But suppose we try a different approach: assume a Creator of infinite power; surely, such a being would be capable of creating infinite worlds… or at least, so large a number of them to seem infinite to us.

“If you assume *that*, then everything else makes sense. The Creator set forces into motion; He created separate worlds for every single human being in existence; each one exists for that human being alone. He’s an artist, but He uses an economy of means, so that there’s much duplication of themes and events and motives throughout the worlds.”

“Oh,” Larry replied softly, “now I begin to see what you’re driving at. In some worlds, Napoleon won the battle of Waterloo — although only in his own world did *everything* work out just right for him; in this one he had to lose…”

“I’m not sure Napoleon ever existed in my world,” Allison said thoughtfully. “I think he’s just a name in the records, although some such person did exist in other worlds. In my world, Hitler was defeated, Roosevelt died — I’d be sorry about that, only I didn’t know him, and he wasn’t very real, anyway; they were both just images carried over from other people’s worlds

“All right,” he said. “And everything worked out wonderfully for you, all your life, huh? You were never really sick, or hurt, or hungry…”

“That’s about it,” she agreed. “I’ve had some hurts and frustrations, but nothing really… well, really crippling. And every one has been important toward getting something I really wanted, or getting to understand something important. You see, Larry, the logic is perfect; I deduced it all from the evidence. There’s no other answer that will stand up.”

Larry smiled. “What does it matter what I think? You’re not going to change your mind.”

Larry gazed at the building in sick disgust. “That’s a house?” he muttered at last.

Allison’s eyes danced with happiness as she looked up at the great mansion. “What, darling? What did you say?”

The house was immense — and super-modern, like a pastry cook’s nightmare. Great columns reared up, connected by sloping beams and buttresses. The rooms were set one on top of each other like shoe-boxes, each at its own angle. The whole building was finished in some kind of bright metal shingle, a frightening butter-yellow. In the morning sun the house blazed and sparkled.

“What are — those?” Larry indicated some forlorn plants snaking up the irregular sides of the house. “Are those supposed to be there?”

Allison blinked, frowning a little. “What did you say, darling? You mean the bougainvillaea? That’s a very exotic plant. It comes from the South Pacific.”

“What’s it do? Hold the house together?”

Allison’s smile vanished. She raised her eyebrow. “Darling, are you feeling all right? Is there anything the matter?”

Larry moved back toward the car. “Let’s go back to town. I’m getting hungry for lunch.”

“All right,” Allison said, watching him oddly. “All right, we’ll go back.”

That night, after dinner, Larry seemed moody and unresponsive. “Let’s go to the *Wind-Up*,” he said suddenly. “I feel like seeing something familiar, for a change.”

“What do you mean?”

Larry nodded at the expensive restaurant they had just left. “All those fancy lights. And little people in uniforms whispering in your ear. In French.”

“If you expect to order food you should know some French,” Allison stated. Her face twisted into an angry pout. “Larry, I’m beginning to wonder about you. The way you acted out at the house. The strange things you said.”

Larry shrugged. “The sight of it drove me temporarily insane.”

“Well, I certainly hope you recover.”

“I’m recovering each minute.”

They came to the *Wind-Up*. Allison started to go inside. Larry stopped for a moment, lighting a cigarette. The good old *Wind-Up*; he felt better already, just standing in front of it. Warm, dark, noisy, the sound of the ragged dixieland combo in the background —

His spirits returned. The peace and contentment of a good run-down bar. He sighed, pushing the door open.

And stopped, stricken.

The *Wind-Up* had changed. It was well-lit. Instead of Max the waiter, there were waitresses in neat white uniforms bustling around. The place was full of well-dressed women, sipping cocktails and chatting. And in the rear was an imitation gypsy orchestra, with a long-haired churl in fake costume, torturing a violin.

Allison turned around. “Come on!” she snapped impatiently. “You’re attracting attention, standing there in the door.”

Larry gazed for a long time at the imitation gypsy orchestra; at the bustling waitresses; the chatting ladies; the recessed neon lighting. Numbness crept over him. He sagged.

“What’s the matter?” Allison caught his arm crossly. “What’s the matter with you?”

“What — what happened?” Larry waved his hand feebly at the interior. “There been an accident?”

“Oh, this. I forgot to tell you. I spoke to Mr O’Mallery about it. Just before I met you last night.”

“Mr O’Mallery?”

“He owns this building. He’s an old friend of mine. I pointed out how — how *dirty* and unattractive his little place was getting. I pointed out what a few improvements would do.”

Larry made his way outside, onto the sidewalk. He ground his cigarette out with his heel and shoved his hands in his pockets.

Allison hurried after him, her cheeks red with indignation. “Larry! Where are you going?”

“Goodnight.”

“Goodnight?” She stared at him in astonishment. “What do you mean?”

“I’m going.”

“Going where?”

“Out. Home. To the park. Anywhere.” Larry started off down the sidewalk, hunched over, hands in his pockets.

Allison caught up with him, stepping angrily in front of him. “Have you gone out of your mind? Do you know what you’re saying?”

“Sure. I’m leaving you; we’re splitting up. Well, it was nice. See you sometime.”

The two spots in Allison’s cheeks glowed like two red coals. “Just a minute, Mr Brewster. I think you’ve forgotten something.” Her voice was hard and brittle.

“Forgotten something? Like what?”

“You *can’t* leave; you can’t walk out on me.”

Larry raised an eyebrow. “I can’t?”

“I think you better reconsider, while you still have time.”

“I don’t get your drift.” Larry yawned. “I think I’ll go home to my three room apartment and go to bed. I’m tired.” He started past her.

“Have you forgotten?” Allison snapped. “Have you forgotten that you’re not *completely real!* That you exist only as a part of my world?”

“Lord! Are you going to start *that* again?”

“Better think about it before you walk off. You exist for my benefit, Mr Brewster. This is *my* world; remember that. Maybe in your own world things are different, but this is *my* world. And in my world things do as *I* say.”

“So long,” Larry Brewster said.

“You’re — you’re still leaving?”

Slowly, Larry Brewster shook his head. “No,” he said. “No, as a matter of fact, I’m not; I’ve changed my mind. You’re too much trouble. *You’re leaving*.”

And as he spoke a ball of radiant light gently settled over Allison Holmes, engulfing her in a glowing aura of splendor. The ball of light lifted, carrying Miss Holmes up into the air, raising her effortlessly above the level of the buildings, into the evening sky.

Larry Brewster watched calmly, as the ball of light carried Miss Holmes off. He was not surprised to see her gradually fade and grow indistinct —

until all at once there was nothing. Nothing but a faint shimmer in the sky. Allison Holmes was gone.

For a long time Larry Brewster stood, deep in thought, rubbing his jaw reflectively. He would miss Allison Holmes. In some ways he had liked her; for a while, she had been fun. Well, she was off now. In this world, Allison Holmes had not been completely real. What he had known, what Larry had called “Allison Holmes,” wasn’t any more than a partial appearance of her.

Then he paused, remembering: as the ball of radiant light had carried her away, he had seen a glimpse — a glimpse past her into a different world, one which was obviously *her* world, her real world, the world she wanted. The buildings were uncomfortably familiar; he could still remember the house…

Then — Allison had been real, after all — existing in Larry’s world, until the time came for her to be transported to hers. Would she find another Larry Brewster there — one who saw eye-to-eye with her? He shuddered at the thought.

In fact, the whole experience had been somewhat unnerving.

“I wonder why,” he murmured softly. He thought back to other unpleasant events, remembering how they had led him to greater satisfactions for their having happened — richness of experience he could not have appreciated without them. “Ah well,” he sighed, “it’s all for the best.”

He started to walk home slowly, hands in his pockets, glancing up at the sky every now and then, as if for confirmation…

A Surface Raid

Harl left the third level, catching a tube car going North. The tube car carried him swiftly through one of the big junction bubbles and down to the fifth level. Harl caught an exciting, fugitive glimpse of people and outlets, a complex tangle of mid-period business and milling confusion.

Then the bubble was behind him and he was nearing his destination, the vast industrial fifth level, sprawling below everything else like some gigantic, soot-encrusted octopus of the night's misrule.

The gleaming tube car ejected him and continued on its way, disappearing down the tube. Harl bounded agilely into the receiving strip and slowed to a stop, still on his feet, swaying expertly back and forth.

A few minutes later he reached the entrance to his father's office. Harl raised his hand and the code door slid back. He entered, his heart thumping with excitement. The time had come.

Edward Boynton was in the planning department studying the outline for a new robot bore when he was informed that his son had entered the main office.

"I'll be right back," Boynton said, making his way past his policy staff and up the ramp into the office.

"Hello, Dad," Harl exclaimed, squaring his shoulders. Father and son exchanged handclasps. Then Harl sat down slowly. "How are things?" he asked. "I guess you expected me."

Then Edward Boynton seated himself behind his desk. "What do you want here?" he demanded. "You know I'm busy."

Harl smiled thinly across at his father. In his brown industrial-planner uniform, Edward Boynton towered above his young son, a massive man with broad shoulders and thick blond hair. His blue eyes were cold and hard as he returned the young man's level gaze.

"I happened to come into some information." Harl glanced uneasily around the room. "Your office isn't tapped, is it?"

"Of course not," the elder Boynton assured him.

"No screens or ears?" Harl relaxed a little. "I've learned that you and several others from your department are going up to the surface soon." Harl leaned eagerly toward his father. "Up to the surface — on a raid for saps."

Ed Boynton's face darkened. "Where did you hear that?" He gazed intently at his son. "Did anyone in this department — ?"

"No," Harl said quickly. "No one informed. I picked up the information on my own, in connection with my educational activities."

Ed Boynton began to understand. "I see. You were experimenting with channel taps, cutting across the confidential channels. Like they teach you to do in communications."

"That's right. I happened to pick up a conversation between you and Robin Turner concerning the raid."

The atmosphere in the room became easier, more friendly. Ed Boynton relaxed, settling back in his chair. "Go on," he urged.

"It was mere chance. I had cut across ten or twelve channels, holding each one for only a second. I was using the Youth League equipment. All at once I recognized your voice. So I stayed on and caught the whole conversation."

“Then you heard most of it.”

Harl nodded. “Exactly when are you going up, Dad? Have you set an exact date?”

Ed Boynton frowned. “No,” he said, “I haven’t. But it will be sometime this week. Almost everything is arranged.”

“How many are going?” Harl asked.

“We’re taking up one mother ship and about thirty eggs. All from this department.”

“Thirty eggs? Sixty or seventy men.”

“That’s right.” Ed Boynton stared intently at his son. “It won’t be a big raid. Nothing compared to some of the Directorate raids of the past few years.”

“But big enough for a single department.”

Ed Boston’s eyes flickered. “Be careful, Harl. If such loose talk should get out —”

“I know. I cut the recorder off as soon as I picked up the drift of your talk. I know what would happen if the Directorate found out a department was raiding without authorization — for its own factories.”

“Do you really know? I wonder.”

“One mother ship and thirty eggs,” Harl exclaimed, ignoring the remark. “You’ll be on the surface for about forty hours?”

“About. It depends on what luck we have.”

“How many saps are you after?”

“We need at least two dozen,” the elder Boynton replied.

“Males?”

“For the most part. A few females, but males primarily.”

“For the basic-industry factory units, I assume.” Harl straightened in his chair. “All right, then. Now that I know more about the raid itself I can get down to business.”

He stared hard at his father.

“Business?” Boynton glanced up sharply. “Precisely what do you mean?”

“My exact reason for coming down here.” Harl leaned across the desk toward his father, his voice clipped and intense. “I’m going along with you on the raid. I want to go along — to get some saps for myself.”

For a moment there was an astonished silence. Then Ed Boynton laughed. “What are you talking about? What do *you* know about saps?”

The inner door slid back, and Robin Turner came quickly into the office. He joined Boynton behind the desk.

“He can’t go,” Turner said flatly. “It would increase the risks tenfold.”

Harl glanced up. “There *was* an ear in here, then.”

“Of course. Turner always listens in.” Ed Boynton nodded, regarding his son thoughtfully. “Why do you want to go along?”

“That’s my concern,” Harl said, his lips tightening.

Turner rasped: “Emotional immaturity. A sub-rational adolescent craving for adventure and excitement. There’s still a few like him who can’t throw the old brain completely off. After two hundred years you’d think —”

“Is that it?” Boynton demanded. “You have some non-adult desire to go up and see the surface?”

“Perhaps,” Harl admitted, flushing a little.

“You can’t come,” Ed Boynton stated emphatically. “It’s far too dangerous. We’re not going up there for romantic adventure. It’s a job — a grim, hard, exacting job. The saps are getting wary. It’s becoming more and more difficult to bring back a full load. We can’t spare any of our eggs for whatever romantic foolishness —”

“I know it’s getting hard,” Harl interrupted. “You don’t have to convince me that it’s almost impossible to round up a whole load.” Harl looked up defiantly at Turner and his father. He chose his words carefully. “And I know that’s why the Directorate considers private raids a major crime against the State.”

Silence.

Finally, Ed Boynton sighed, a reluctant admiration in his stare. He looked his son slowly up and down. “Okay, Harl,” he said. “You win.”

Turner said nothing. His face was hard.

Harl got quickly to his feet. “Then it’s all settled. I’ll return to my quarters and get prepared. As soon as you’re ready to go, notify me at once. I’ll join you at the launching stage on the first level.”

The elder Boynton shook his head. “We’re not leaving from the first level. It would be too risky.” His voice was heavy. “There are too many Directorate guards prowling around. We have the ship down here at fifth level, in one of the warehouses.”

“Where shall I meet you, then?”

Ed Boynton stood up slowly. “We’ll notify you, Harl. It will be soon, I promise you. In a couple of periods, at the most. Be at our vocational quarters.”

“The surface is completely cool, isn’t it?” Harl asked. “There aren’t any radioactive areas left?”

“It’s been cool for fifty years,” his father assured him.

“Then I won’t have to worry about a radiation shield,” Harl said. “One more thing, Dad. What language will we have to use? Can we speak our regular —”

Ed Boynton shook his head. “No. The saps never mastered any of the rational semantic systems. We’ll have to revert to the old traditional forms.”

Harl’s face fell. “I don’t know any of the traditional forms. They’re not being taught anymore.”

Ed Boynton shrugged. “It doesn’t matter.”

“How about their defenses? What sort of weapons should I bring? Will a screen and blast rifle be sufficient?”

“Only the screen is of vital importance,” the elder Boynton said. “When the saps see us they scatter in all directions. One look at us and off they go.”

“Fine,” Harl said. “I’ll have my screen checked over.” He moved toward the door. “I’ll go back up to the third level. I’ll be expecting your signal. I’ll have my equipment ready.”

“All right,” Ed Boynton said.

The two men watched the door slide shut after the youth.

“Quite a boy,” Turner muttered.

“Turning out to be something, after all,” Ed Boynton murmured. “He’ll go a long way.” He rubbed his jaw thoughtfully. “But I wonder how he’ll act up on the surface during the raid.”

Harl met with his group leader on the third level, an hour after he left his father’s office.

“Then it’s all settled?” Fashold asked, looking up from his report spools.

“All settled. They’re going to signal me as soon as the ship is ready.”

“By the way.” Fashold put down the spools, pushing the scanner back. “I’ve learned something about the saps. As a YL leader I have access to the Directorate files. I’ve learned something virtually no one else knows.”

“What is it?” asked Harl.

“Harl, the saps are related to us. They’re a different species, but they’re very closely related to us.”

“Go on,” Harl urged.

“At one time there was only the one species — the saps. Their full name is *homo sapiens.* We grew out of them, developed from them. We’re

biogenetic mutants. The change occurred during the Third World War, two and a half centuries ago. Up to that time there had never been any *technos."*

"Technos?"

Fashold smiled. That's what they called us at first. When they thought of us only as a separate class, and not as a distinct race. *Technos.* That was their name for *us.* That was how they always referred to us."

"But why? It's a strange name. Why *technos*, Fashold?"

"Because the first mutants appeared among the technocratic classes and gradually spread throughout all other educated classes. They appeared among scientists, scholars, field workers, trained groups, all the various specialized classes."

"And the saps didn't realize —"

"They thought of us only as a class, as I've just told you. That was during the Third World War and after. It was during the Final War that we fully emerged as recognizably and profoundly different. It became evident that we weren't just another specialized offshoot of *homo sapiens.* Not just another class of men more educated than the rest, with higher intellectual capacities."

Fashold gazed off into the distance. "During the Final War we emerged and showed ourselves for what we really were — a superior species supplanting *homo sapiens* in the same way that *homo sapiens* had supplanted Neanderthal man."

Harl considered what Fashold had said. "I didn't realize we were so closely related to them. I had no idea we had emerged so lately."

Fashold nodded. "It was only two centuries ago, during the war that ravaged the surface of the planet. Most of us were working down in the big

underground laboratories and factories under the different mountain ranges — the Urals, the Alps, and the Rockies. We were down underground, under miles of rock and dirt and clay. And on the surface *homo sapiens* slugged it out with the weapons we designed."

"I'm beginning to understand. We designed the weapons for them to fight the war. They used our weapons without realizing —"

"We designed them and the saps used them to destroy themselves," Fashold interjected. "It was Nature's crucible, the elimination of one species and the emergence of another. We gave them the weapons and they destroyed themselves. When the war ended the surface was fused, and nothing but ash and hydroglass and radioactive clouds remained.

"We sent out scouting parties from our underground labs and found nothing but a silent, barren waste. It had been accomplished. They were gone, wiped out. And we had come to take their place."

"Not all of them could have been wiped out," Harl pointed out. "There are still a lot of them up there on the surface."

"True," Fashold admitted. "Some survived. Scattered remnants here and there. Gradually, as the surface cooled, they began to reform again, getting together and building little villages and huts. Yes, and even clearing some of the land — planting and growing things. But they're still remnants of a dying race now almost extinct, as the Neanderthal is extinct."

"So nothing exists now but males and females without homes."

"There are a few villages here and there — wherever they've managed to clear the surface. But they've descended to utter savagery, and live like animals, wearing skins and hunting with rocks and spears. They've become almost bestial remnants who offer no organized resistance when we go up to raid a few of their villages for our factories."

“Then we —” Harl broke off abruptly as a faint bell sounded. He turned in startled apprehension, snapping on the vidphone.

His father’s face formed on the screen, hard and stern. “Okay, Harl,” he said. “We’re ready.”

“So soon? But —”

“We set the time ahead. Come down to my office.” The image on the screen dimmed and vanished.

Harl did not move.

“They must have got worried,” Fashold said, grinning. “They were apparently afraid you’d pass the information along.”

“I’m all ready,” Harl said. He picked up his blast gun from the table. “How do I look?”

In his silver communications uniform Harl looked splendid and impressive. He had put on heavy military boots and gloves. In one hand he gripped his blast gun. Around his waist was his screen control-belt.

“What’s that?” Fashold asked, as Harl lowered black goggles over his eyes.

“These? Oh, they’re for the sun.”

“Of course — the sun. I forgot.”

Harl cradled his gun, balancing it expertly. “The sun would blind me. The goggles protect my eyes. I’ll be safe up there, with my screen and gun, and these goggles.”

“I hope so.” Still grinning, Fashold thumped him on the back as he moved toward the door. “Bring back a lot of saps. Do a good job — and don’t forget to include a female!”

The mother ship moved slowly from the warehouse, and out onto the lift stage, a rotund black teardrop emerging from storage. Its port locks slid back, and ramps climbed to meet the locks. Immediately supplies and equipment were on their way up, rising into the bowels of the ship.

“Almost ready,” Turner said, his face twitching with nervousness as he gazed through the observation windows at the loading ramps outside. “I hope nothing goes wrong. If the Directorate should find out —”

“Quit worrying!” Ed Boynton ordered. “You picked the wrong time to let your thalamic impulses take over control.”

“Sorry.” Turner tightened his lips and moved away from the windows. The lift stage was ready to rise.

“Let’s get started,” Boynton urged. “Have you men from the department at each level?”

“Nobody but department members will be near the stage,” Turner replied.

“Where is the balance of the crew?” Boynton demanded.

“At the first level. I sent them up during the day.”

“Very well.” Boynton gave the signal, and the stage under the ship began slowly to rise, lifting them steadily toward the level above.

Harl peered out the observation windows, watching the fifth level drop below and the fourth level, the vast commercial center of the undersurface system, come into view.

“Won’t be long,” Ed Boynton said, as the fourth level glided past. “So far so good.”

“Where will we finally emerge?” Harl asked.

“In the latter stages of the war our various underground structures were connected by tunnels. That original network formed the basis of our present system. We’ll emerge at one of the original entrances, located in the mountain range called ‘The Alps’.”

“The Alps,” Harl murmured.

“Yes, in Europe. We have maps of the surface, showing locations of sap villages in that region. A whole cluster of villages lie to the North and North East in what used to be Denmark and Germany. We’ve never raided there before. The saps have managed to clear the slag away from several thousand acres in that region, and seem gradually to be reclaiming most of Europe.”

“But why, Dad?” Harl asked.

Ed Boynton shrugged. “I don’t know. They don’t seem to have set themselves any organized objective. They show no signs at all, in fact, of emerging from their savage state. All their traditions were lost — books and records, inventions, and techniques. If you ask me —” He broke off abruptly. “Here comes the third level. We’re almost there.”

The huge mother ship roared slowly along, gliding above the surface of the planet. Harl peered out, awed by what he saw below.

Across the surface of the earth lay a crust of slag, an endless coating of blackened rock. The mineral deposit was unbroken except for occasional hills sharply jutting up, ash-covered, and with a few sparse bushes growing near their tops. Great sheets of sun-darkening ash drifted across the sky, but

nothing living stirred. The surface of the earth was dead and barren, without sign of life.

“Is it all like that?” Harl asked.

Ed Boynton shook his head. “Not all. The saps have reclaimed some of the land.” He gripped his son’s arm and pointed. “See off that way? They’ve done quite a bit of clearing up there.”

“Just how do they clear the slag?” Harl asked.

“It’s hard,” his father replied. “Fused, like volcanic glass — hydroglass — from the hydrogen bombs. They pick it away bit by bit, year after year. With their hands, with rocks, and with the axes made from the glass itself.”

“Why don’t they develop better tools?”

Ed Boynton grinned wryly. “You know the answer to that. *We* made most of their tools for them, their tools and weapons and inventions, for hundreds of years.”

“Here we go,” Turner said. “We’re landing.”

The ship settled down, coming to rest on the surface of the slag. For a moment the blackened rock rumbled under them. Then there was silence.

“We’re down,” Turner said.

Ed Boynton studied the surface map, sending it darting through the scanner. “We’ll send out ten eggs as a starter. If we don’t have much luck here we’ll take the ship farther North. But we should do well. This area has never been raided before.”

“How will the eggs cover?” Turner asked.

“The eggs will fan out in a spectrum, giving each egg a separate area. Our egg will move over toward the right. If we have any success, we’ll return to the ship at once. Otherwise, we’ll stay out until nightfall.”

“Nightfall?” Harl asked.

Ed Boynton smiled. “Until dark. Until this side of the planet is turned away from the sun.”

“Let’s go,” Turner said impatiently.

The port locks opened. The first eggs scooted out onto the slag, their treads digging into the slippery surface. One by one they emerged from the black hull of the mother ship, tiny spheres with their backs tapering into jet tubes, and their noses blunted into control turrets. They roared off across the slag and disappeared.

“Ours, next,” Ed Boynton said.

Harl nodded and gripped his blast rifle tightly. He lowered his protection goggles over his eyes, and Turner and Boynton did the same. They entered their egg, Boynton seating himself behind the controls.

A moment later they shot out of the ship onto the smooth surface of the planet.

Harl peered out. He could see nothing but slag on all sides. Slag and drifting clouds of ash.

“It’s dismal,” he murmured. “Even with the goggles the sun burns my eyes.”

“Don’t look at it then,” Ed Boynton cautioned. “Look away from it.”

“I can’t help it. It’s so — so strange.”

Ed Boynton grunted and increased the egg's speed. Far ahead of them something was coming into view. He headed the egg toward it.

"What's that?" Turner asked, alarmed.

"Trees," Boynton said, reassuringly. "Trees growing up in a clump. It marks the end of the slag. Then there's ash for a while, and finally fields the saps have planted."

Boynton drove the egg to the edge of the slag area. He stopped it where the slag ended and the clump of trees began, snapping off the jets and locking the treads. He and Harl and Turner got out cautiously, their guns ready.

Nothing stirred. There was only silence, and the endless surface of slag. Between drifting clouds of ash the sky was a pale robin's-egg blue, and a few moisture clouds drifted with the ash. The air smelled good. It was thin and crisp, and the sun shed a friendly warmth.

"Put your screens on," Ed Boynton warned. As he spoke he snapped the switch at his belt and his own screen hummed, flashing on around him. Swiftly, Boynton's figure dimmed, wavering and fading. It winked out — and was gone.

Turner quickly followed suit. "Okay," his voice came, from a glimmering oval to Harl's right. "You next."

Harl turned on his screen. For an instant a strange cold fire enveloped him from head to foot, bathing him in sparks. Then his body too dimmed and vanished. The screens were functioning perfectly.

In Harl's ears a faint clicking sounded, warning him of the presence of the two others. "I can hear you," Harl said. "Your screens are in my earphones."

“Don’t wander off,” Ed Boynton cautioned. “Keep by us and listen for the clicks. It’s dangerous to be separated, up here on the surface.”

Harl advanced carefully. The other two were on his right, a few yards off. They were crossing a dry yellow field overgrown with some kind of plant. The plants had long stalks that broke and crunched underfoot. Behind Harl was a trail of broken vegetation. He could clearly see the similar trails which Turner and his father were leaving.

But now it became necessary for him to separate from Turner and his father. Ahead of Harl the outline of a sap village rose up, its huts fashioned from some kind of plant fiber piled in heaps on top of wooden frames. He could see the shadowy outlines of animals tied to the huts. Trees and plants encircled the village, and he could distinguish the moving forms of people, and hear their voices.

People — saps. His heart beat quickly. With luck he might capture and bring back three or four for the Youth League. He felt suddenly confident and unafraid. Surely it would not be difficult. Planted fields, tied-up animals, rickety huts leaning and tilting —

The smell of dung commingling with the heat of the late afternoon became almost intolerable as Harl advanced. Cries, and other sounds of feverish human activity, drifted to him. The ground was flat and dry, weeds and plants grew up everywhere. He left the yellow field and came onto a narrow footpath, littered with human refuse and animal dung.

And just beyond the road was the village.

The clicks had diminished in his earphones. Now they died out completely. Harl grinned to himself. He had moved away from Turner and Boynton, and was no longer in contact with them. They had no idea where he was.

He turned to the left, circling cautiously around the edge of the village. He passed by a hut, then several in a cluster. Around him green trees and

plants grew in great clumps, and directly ahead of him gleamed a narrow stream with sloping, moss-covered banks.

A dozen people were washing at the edge of the stream, the children leaping into the water and scrambling up on the bank.

Harl halted, gazing at them in astonishment. Their skins were dark, almost black. A shiny, coppery black it was — a rich bronze mixed in with the dirt-color. *Was* it dirt?

He suddenly realized that the bathers had been burned black by the constant sun. The hydrogen explosions had thinned the atmosphere, searing off most of the layer of moisture clouds and for two hundred years the sun had beat mercilessly down on them — in sharp contrast to his own race. Undersurface, there was no ultraviolet light to burn the skin, or to raise the pigment level. He and the other *technos* had lost their skin color. There was no need for it in their subterranean world.

But the bathers were incredibly dark, a rich reddish-black color. And they had nothing on at all. They were leaping and jumping eagerly about, splashing through the water and sunning themselves on the bank.

Harl watched them for a time. Children and three or four scrawny, elderly females. Would they do? He shook his head, and warily encircled the stream.

He continued on back among the huts, walking slowly and carefully, gazing alertly around with his gun held ready.

A faint breeze blew against him, rustling through the trees to his right. The sounds of the bathing children mixed with the dung smell, the wind, and the swaying of the trees.

Harl advanced cautiously. He was invisible, but he knew that he might at any moment be discovered and tracked down by his footprints or the sounds he might make. And if someone ran against him —

He stealthily darted past a hut, and emerged into an open place, a flat area of beaten earth. In the shade of the hut a dog lay sleeping with flies crawling over its lean flanks. An old woman was sitting on the porch of the rude dwelling, combing her long gray hair with a bone comb.

Harl passed by her cautiously. In the center of the open place a group of young men were standing. They were gesturing and talking together. Some were cleaning their weapons, long spears and knives of an inconceivable primitiveness. On the ground lay a dead animal, a huge beast with long, gleaming tusks and a thick hide. Blood oozed from its mouth — thick, dark blood. One of the young men turned suddenly — and kicked it with his foot.

Harl came up to the young men, and stopped. They were dressed in cloth clothing, long leg garments and shirts. Their feet were bare on top, for they wore loosely-woven vegetable-fiber sandals instead of shoes. They were clean-shaven, but their skin gleamed almost ebony black. Their sleeves were rolled up, exposing bulging, glistening muscles, dripping with sweat in the hot sun.

Harl could not understand what they were saying, but he was sure they were speaking one of the archaic traditional tongues.

He passed on. At the other side of the open place a group of old men was sitting cross-legged in a circle, weaving rough cloth on crude frames. Harl watched them in silence for a time. Their chatter drifted noisily up to him. Each old man was bent intently over his frame, his eyes glued on his work.

Beyond the row of huts some younger men and women were plowing a field, dragging the plow by ropes securely attached to their waists and shoulders.

Harl wandered on, fascinated. Everyone was engaged in some kind of activity — except the dog asleep under the hut. The young men with their spears, the old woman in front of the hut combing her hair, and weaving.

In one corner a huge woman was teaching a child what appeared to be an adding and subtracting game, using small sticks in lieu of figures. Two men were removing the hide from a small furred animal, stripping the pelt off carefully.

Harl passed a wall of hides, all hung up carefully to dry. The dull stench irritated his nostrils, making him want to sneeze. He passed a group of children pounding grain in a hollowed-out stone, beating the grain into meal. None of them looked up as he passed.

Some animals were tied together in a bunch. Some lay in the shade, big beasts with huge udders. They watched him silently.

Harl came to the edge of the village and stopped. From that point onward deserted fields stretched out. For perhaps a mile beyond the fields were trees and bushes, and beyond that the endless miles of slag.

He turned and walked back. Off to one side, sitting in the shade, a young man was chipping away at a block of hydroslag, cutting it carefully with a few rough tools. He seemed to be fashioning a weapon. Harl watched him, watched the endless, solemn blows descending again and again. The slag was hard. It was a long tedious job.

He walked on. A group of women were mending broken arrows. Their chatter followed him for a time, and he found himself wishing he could understand it. Everyone was busy, working rapidly. Dark, shiny arms rose and fell, and the chattering murmur of voices drifted back and forth.

Activity. Laughter. A child’s laughter echoed suddenly through the village, and a few heads turned. Harl bent down, intently studying a man’s head at close range.

A strong face he had. His twisted knotted hair was short, and his teeth were even and white. On his arms were copper bracelets, almost matching

the rich bronze hue of his skin. His bare chest was marked with tattoos, etched into his flesh with brightly colored pigments.

Harl wandered back the way he had come. He passed the old woman on the porch, and paused again to observe her. She had stopped combing her hair. Now she was fixing a child's hair, braiding it skillfully back into an elaborate pattern. Harl watched her, fascinated. The pattern was intricate, complex, and the task took a long time. The old woman's faded eyes were intent on the child's hair, on the detailed work. Her withered hands flew.

Harl walked on, moving toward the stream. He passed the bathing children again. They had all climbed out on the bank and were drying themselves in the sun. So these were the *saps*. The race that was dying out — the dying race, soon to be extinct. Remnants.

But they did not appear to be a dying race. They were working hard, tirelessly chipping at the hydroslag, fixing their arrows, hunting, plowing, pounding grain, weaving, combing —

He stopped suddenly, rigid, his blast gun at his shoulder. Ahead of him, through the trees by the stream, something moved. Then he heard two voices — a man's voice and a woman's voice, raised in excited conversation.

Harl advanced cautiously. He pushed past a flowering bush, and peered into the gloom between the trees.

A man and woman were sitting at the edge of the water, in the dark shadow of the tree. The man was making bowls, shaping them out of wet clay scooped up from the water. His fingers flew, expertly, rapidly. He spun the bowls, turning them on a revolving platform between his knees.

As the man finished the bowls the woman took them and painted them with deft, vigorous strokes of a crude brush gleaming with red pigment.

The woman was beautiful. Harl gazed down at her in stunned admiration. She sat almost motionless, resting against a tree, holding each bowl securely as she painted it. Her black hair hung down to her waist, falling across her shoulders and back. Her features were finely cut, each line clear and vivid, her dark eyes immense. She studied each bowl intently, her lips moving a little and Harl noticed that her hands were small and delicately fashioned.

He walked over toward her, moving carefully. The woman did not hear him or look up. In growing wonder he realized that her coppery body was small and beautifully formed, her limbs slender and supple. She did not seem to be aware of him.

Suddenly the man spoke again. The woman glanced up, lowering the bowl to the ground. She rested a minute, cleaning her brush with a leaf. She wore rough leg garments, reaching down to her knees, and tied at her waist with a twisted flaxen rope. She wore no other garment. Her feet and shoulders were bare, and in the afternoon sun her bosom rose and fell quickly as she breathed.

The man said something else. After a moment the woman picked up another bowl and began to paint again. The two of them worked rapidly, silently, both intent on their work.

Harl studied the bowls. They were all of similar design. The man made them rapidly, building them up from coils of clay, and then snaking the coils around and around, higher and higher. He slapped water against the clay, rubbing the surface smooth and firm. Finally he laid them out in rows, to dry in the sun.

The woman selected the bowls that were dry and then painted them.

Harl watched her. He studied her a long time — the way she moved her coppery body, the intense expression on her face, the faint movement of her lips and chin. Her fingers were slender and exquisitely tapered. Her nails

were long, coming finally to a point. She held each bowl carefully, turning it with expert care, painting her design with rapid strokes.

He watched her closely. She was painting the same design on each bowl, painting it again and again. A bird, and then a tree. A line that appeared to represent the ground. A cloud suspended directly above it.

What was the precise significance of that recurrent motif? Harl bent closer, peering intently. Was it really the same? He watched the skillful motion of her hands as she took bowl after bowl, starting the design again and again. The design was basically the same — but each time she made it a little different. No two bowls came out exactly the same.

He was both puzzled, and fascinated. It was the same design, but altered slightly each time. The color of the bird would be altered — or the length of its plume. Less frequently the position of the tree, or the cloud. Once she painted two tiny clouds hovering above the ground. Sometimes she put grass and the outline of hills in the background.

Suddenly the man got to his feet, wiping his hands on his cloth. He spoke to the girl and then hurried off, threading his way through the bushes until he was lost to view,

Harl glanced around excitedly. The girl went right on painting rapidly, calmly. The man had disappeared and the girl remained alone, painting quietly by herself.

Harl was caught in the grip of conflicting and almost overpowering emotions. He wanted to speak to the girl, to ask her about her painting, her design. He wanted to ask her why she changed it each time.

He wanted to sit down and talk to her. To speak to her and hear her talk to him. It was strange. He didn’t understand it himself. His vision swam, twisting and blurring, and sweat dripped from his neck and stooping shoulders. The girl continued to paint. She did not look up, or suspect that he was standing directly in front of her. Harl’s hand flew to his belt. He took a deep breath, hesitating. Dared he? Should he? The man would be back —

Harl pressed the stud on his belt. Around him the screen hissed, and sparked.

The girl glanced up, startled. Her eyes widened in swift horror.

She screamed.

Harl stepped quickly back, gripping his gun, appalled by what he had done.

The girl scrambled to her feet, sending bowls and paints flying. She gazed at him, her eyes still wide, her mouth open. Slowly she backed away toward the bushes. Then abruptly she turned and fled, crashing through the shrubbery, screaming and shrieking.

Harl straightened in sudden fear. Quickly, he restored his screen. The village was alive with growing sound. He could hear voices raised in excited panic, and the sound of people running, crashing through the bushes — the entire village erupting in a torrent of excited activity.

Harl made his way quickly down the stream, past the bushes and out into the open.

Suddenly he stopped, his heart pounding furiously. A crowd of saps was hurrying toward the stream — men with spears, old women, and shrieking children. At the edge of the bushes they stopped, staring and listening, their faces frozen in a strange, intent expression. Then they were advancing into the bushes, furiously pushing the branches out of the way — *searching for him.*

Abruptly his earphones clicked.

“Harl!” Ed Boynton’s voice came clear and sharp. “Harl, lad!”

Harl jumped, then cried out in desperate gratefulness. “Dad, I’m here.”

Ed Boynton gripped his arm, yanking him off balance. “What’s the matter with you? Where did you go? What did you do?”

“You got him?” Turner’s voice broke in. “Come on then — both of you! We have to get out of here, fast. They’re scattering white powder everywhere.”

Saps were rushing around, throwing the powder into the air in great clouds. It drifted through the air, settling down over everything. It appeared to be a kind of pulverized chalk. Other saps were sprinkling oil from big jars and shouting in high-pitched excitement.

“We better get out,” Boynton agreed grimly. “We don’t want to tangle with them when they’re aroused.”

Harl hesitated. “But —”

“Come on!” his father urged, tugging at his arm. “Let’s go. We haven’t a moment to lose.”

Harl gazed back. He could not see the woman, but saps were running everywhere, throwing their sheets of chalk and sprinkling the oil. Saps with iron-tipped spears advanced ominously, kicking at the weeds and bushes as they circled about.

Harl allowed himself to be led by his father. His mind whirled. The woman was gone, and he was sure that he would never see her again. When he had made himself visible she had screamed, and run off.

Why? It didn’t make sense. Why had she recoiled from him in blind terror? What had he done?

And what did it matter to him whether he saw her again or not? Why was she important? He did not understand. He did not understand *himself.*

There was no rational explanation for what had happened. It was totally incomprehensible.

Harl followed his father and Turner back to the egg, still bewildered and wretched, still trying to understand, to grasp the meaning of what had happened between him and the woman. It did not make sense. He had gone out of his mind and then she had gone out of *her* mind. There had to be some meaning to it — if he could only grasp it.

At the egg Ed Boynton halted, glancing back. “We were lucky to get away,” he said to Harl, shaking his head. “When they’re aroused they’re like beasts. They’re animals, Harl. That’s what they are. Savage animals.”

“Come on,” Turner said impatiently. “Let’s get out of here — while we still can walk.”

Julie continued to shudder even after she had been carefully bathed and purified in the stream and rubbed down with oil by one of the older women.

She sat in a heap, her arms wrapped around her knees, shaking and trembling uncontrollably. Ken, her brother, stood beside her, grim-faced, his hand on her bare, coppery shoulder.

“What was it?” Julie murmured. “What was it?” She shuddered. “It was — horrible. It revolted me, made me ill, just to look at it.”

“What did it look like?” Ken demanded.

“It was — it was like a man. But it couldn’t have been a man. It was metallic all over, from head to foot, and it had huge hands and feet. Its face was all pasty white like — like meal. It was — sickly. Hideously sickly. White and metallic, and sickly. Like some kind of root dug up out of the soil.”

Ken turned to the old man sitting behind him, who was listening intently. “What was it?” he demanded. “What was it, Mr Stebbins? You know about such things. What did she see?”

Mr Stebbins got slowly to his feet. “You say it had white skin? Pasty? Like dough? And huge hands and feet?”

Julie nodded. “And — something else.”

“What?”

“It was *blind*. It had something instead of eyes. Two black spaces. Darkness.” She shuddered and stared toward the stream.

Suddenly Mr Stebbins tensed, his jaw hardening. He nodded. “I know,” he said. “I know what it was.”

“What was it?”

Mr Stebbins muttered to himself, frowning. “It’s not possible. But your description —” He stared off in the distance, his brow wrinkled. “They live underground,” he said finally, “under the surface. They emerge from the mountains. They live in the earth, in great tunnels and chambers they have hewn out for themselves. They are not men. They look like men, but they are not. They live under the ground and dig the metal from the earth. They dig and horde the metal. They seldom come up to the surface. They cannot look at the sun.”

“What are they called?” Julie asked.

Mr Stebbins searched his mind, thinking back through the years. Back to the old books and legends he had heard. Things that lived under the ground… Like men but not men… Things that dug tunnels, that mined metals… Things that were blind and had great hands and feet and pasty white skin.

“Goblins,” Mr Stebbins stated. “What you saw was a goblin.”

Julie nodded, gazing down wide-eyed at the ground, her arms clasped around her knees. “Yes,” she said. “That sounds like what it was. It frightened me. I was so afraid. I turned and ran. It seemed so horrible.” She looked up at her brother, smiling a little. “But I’m better now…”

Ken rubbed his big dark hands together, nodding with relief. “Fine,” he said. “Now we can get back to work. There’s a lot to do. A lot of things to get done.”

Project: Earth

The sound echoed hollowly through the big frame house. It vibrated among the dishes in the kitchen, the gutters along the roof, thumping slowly and evenly like distant thunder. From time to time it ceased, but then it began again, booming through the quiet night, a relentless sound, brutal in its regularity. From the top floor of the big house.

In the bathroom the three children huddled around the chair, nervous and hushed, pushing against each other with curiosity.

“You sure he can’t see us?” Tommy rasped.

“How could he see us? Just don’t make any noise.” Dave Grant shifted on the chair, his face to the wall. “Don’t talk so loud.” He went on looking, ignoring them both.

“Let me see,” Joan whispered, nudging her brother with a sharp elbow. “Get out of the way.”

“Shut up.” Dave pushed her back. “I can see better now.” He turned up the light.

“I want to see,” Tommy said. He pushed Dave off the chair onto the bathroom floor. “Come on.”

Dave withdrew sullenly. “It’s our house.”

Tommy stepped cautiously up onto the chair. He put his eye to the crack, his face against the wall. For a time he saw nothing. The crack was narrow and the light on the other side was bad. Then, gradually, he began to make out shapes, forms beyond the wall.

Edward Billings was sitting at an immense old-fashioned desk. He had stopped typing and was resting his eyes. From his vest pocket he had taken a round pocket watch. Slowly, carefully, he wound the great watch. Without his glasses his lean, withered face seemed naked and bleak, the features of some elderly bird. Then he put his glasses on again and drew his chair closer to the desk.

He began to type, working with expert fingers the towering mass of metal and parts that reared up before him. Again the ominous booming echoed through the house, resuming its insistent beat.

Mr Billings's room was dark and littered. Books and papers lay everywhere, in piles and stacks, on the desk, on the table, in heaps on the floor. The walls were covered with charts, anatomy charts, maps, astronomy charts, signs of the zodiac. By the windows rows of dust-covered chemical bottles and packages lay stacked. A stuffed bird stood on the top of the bookcase, gray and drooping. On the desk was a huge magnifying glass, Greek and Hebrew dictionaries, a postage stamp box, a bone letter opener. Against the door a curling strip of flypaper moved with the air currents rising from the gas heater.

The remains of a magic lantern lay against one wall. A black satchel with clothes piled on it. Shirts and socks and a long frock coat, faded and threadbare. Heaps of newspapers and magazines, tied with brown cord. A great black umbrella against the table, a pool of sticky water around its metal point. A glass frame of dried butterflies, pressed into yellowing cotton.

And at the desk the huge old man hunched over his ancient typewriter and heaps of notes and papers.

"Gosh," Tommy said.

Edward Billings was working on his report. The report was open on the desk beside him, an immense book, leather-bound, bulging at its cracked seams. He was transferring material into it from his heaps of notes.

The steady thumping of the great typewriter made the things in the bathroom rattle and shake, the light fixture, the bottles and tubes in the medicine cabinet. Even the floor under the children's feet.

"He's some kind of Communist agent," Joan said. "He's drawing maps of the city so he can set off bombs when Moscow gives the word."

The heck he is," Dave said angrily.

"Don't you see all the maps and pencils and papers? Why else would __"

"Be quiet," Dave snapped. "He will hear us. He is not a spy. He's too old to be a spy."

"What is he, then?"

"I don't know. But he isn't a spy. You're sure dumb. Anyhow, spies have beards."

"Maybe he's a criminal," Joan said.

"I talked to him once," Dave said. "He was coming downstairs. He spoke to me and gave me some candy out of a bag."

"What kind of candy was it?"

"I don't know. Hard candy. It wasn't any good."

"What's he do?" Tommy asked, turning from the crack.

"Sits in his room all day. Typing."

“Doesn’t he work?”

Dave sneered. “That’s what he does. He writes on his report. He’s an official with a company.”

“What company?”

“I forget.”

“Doesn’t he ever go out?”

“He goes out on the roof.”

“On the roof?”

“He has a porch he goes out on. We fixed it. It’s part of the apartment. He’s got a garden. He comes downstairs and gets dirt from the back yard.”

“Shhh!” Tommy warned. “He turned around.”

Edward Billings had got to his feet. He was covering the typewriter with a black cloth, pushing it back and gathering up the pencils and erasers. He opened the desk drawer and dropped the pencils into it.

“He’s through,” Tommy said. “He’s finished working.”

The old man removed his glasses and put them away in a case. He dabbed at his forehead wearily, loosening his collar and necktie. His neck was long and the cords stood out from yellow, wrinkled skin. His adam’s apple bobbed up and down as he sipped some water from a glass.

His eyes were blue and faded, almost without color. For a moment he gazed directly at Tommy, his hawklike face blank. Then abruptly he left the room, going through a door.

“He’s going to bed,” Tommy said.

Mr Billings returned, a towel over his arm. At the desk he stopped and laid the towel over the back of the chair. He lifted the massive report book and carried it from the desk over to the bookcase, holding it tightly with both hands. It was heavy. He laid it down and left the room again.

The report was very close. Tommy could make out the gold letters stamped into the cracked leather binding. He gazed at the letters a long time — until Joan finally pushed him away from the crack, shoving him impatiently off the chair.

Tommy stepped down and moved away, awed and fascinated by what he had seen. The great report book, the huge volume of material on which the old man worked, day after day. In the flickering light from the lamp on the desk he had easily been able to make out the gold-stamped words on the ragged leather binding.

PROJECT B: EARTH.

“Let’s go,” Dave said. “He’ll come in here in a couple minutes. He might catch us watching.”

“You’re afraid of him,” Joan taunted.

“So are you. So is Mom. So is everybody.” He glanced at Tommy. “You afraid of him?”

Tommy shook his head. “I’d sure like to know what’s in that book,” he murmured. “I’d sure like to know what that old man is doing.”

The late afternoon sunlight shone down bright and cold. Edward Billings came slowly down the back steps, an empty pail in one hand, rolled-up newspapers under his arm. He paused a moment, shielding his

eyes and gazing around him. Then he disappeared into the back yard, pushing through the thick wet grass.

Tommy stepped out from behind the garage. He raced silently up the steps two at a time. He entered the building, hurrying down the dark corridor.

A moment later he stood before the door of Edward Billings's apartment, his chest rising and falling, listening intently.

There was no sound.

Tommy tried the knob. It turned easily. He pushed. The door swung open and a musty cloud of warm air drifted past him out into the corridor.

He had little time. The old man would be coming back with his pail of dirt from the yard.

Tommy entered the room and crossed to the bookcase, his heart pounding excitedly. The huge report book lay among heaps of notes and bundles of clippings. He pushed the papers away, sliding them from the book. He opened it quickly, at random, the thick pages crackling and bending.

Denmark.

Figures and facts. Endless facts, pages and columns, row after row. The lines of type danced before his eyes. He could make little out of them. He turned to another section.

New York.

Facts about New York. He struggled to understand the column heads. The number of people. What they did. How they lived. What they earned.

How they spent their time. Their beliefs. Politics. Philosophy. Morals. Their age. Health. Intelligence. Graphs and statistics, averages and evaluations.

Evaluations. Appraisals. He shook his head and turned to another section.

California.

Population. Wealth. Activity of the state government. Ports and harbors. Facts, facts, facts —

Facts on everything. Everywhere. He thumbed through the report. On every part of the world. Every city, every state, every country. Any and all possible information.

Tommy closed the report uneasily. He wandered restlessly around the room, examining the heaps of notes and papers, the bundles of clippings and charts. The old man, typing day after day. Gathering facts, facts about the whole world. The earth. A report on the earth, the earth and everything on it. All the people. Everything they did and thought, their actions, deeds, achievements, beliefs, prejudices. A great report of all the information in the whole world.

Tommy picked up the big magnifying glass from the desk. He examined the surface of the desk with it, studying the wood. After a moment he put down the glass and picked up the bone letter knife. He put down the letter knife and examined the broken magic lantern in the corner. The frame of dead butterflies. The drooping stuffed bird. The bottles of chemicals.

He left the room, going out onto the roof porch. The late afternoon sunlight flickered fitfully; the sun was going down. In the center of the porch was a wooden frame, dirt and grass heaped around it. Along the rail were big earthen jars, sacks of fertilizer, damp packages of seeds. An overturned spray gun. A dirty trowel. Strips of carpet and a rickety chair. A sprinkling can.

Over the wood frame was a wire netting. Tommy bent down, peering through the netting. He saw plants, small plants in rows. Some moss, growing on the ground. Tangled plants, tiny and very intricate.

At one place some dried grass was heaped up in a pile. Like some sort of cocoon.

Bugs? Insects of some sort? Animals?

He took a straw and poked it through the netting at the dried grass. The grass stirred. Something was in it. There were other cocoons, several of them, here and there among the plants.

Suddenly something scuttled out of one of the cocoons, racing across the grass. It squeaked in fright. A second followed it. Pink, running quickly. A small herd of shrilling pink things, two inches high, running and dashing among the plants.

Tommy leaned closer, squinting excitedly through the netting, trying to see what they were. Hairless. Some kind of hairless animals. But tiny, tiny as grasshoppers. Baby things? His pulse raced wildly. Baby things or maybe —

A sound. He turned quickly, rigid.

Edward Billings stood at the door, gasping for breath. He set down the pail of dirt, sighing and feeling for his handkerchief in the pocket of his dark blue coat. He mopped his forehead silently, gazing at the boy standing by the frame.

“Who are you, young man?” Billings said, after a moment. “I don’t remember seeing you before.”

Tommy shook his head. “No.”

“What are you doing here?”

“Nothing.”

“Would you like to carry this pail out onto the porch for me? It’s heavier than I realized.”

Tommy stood for a moment. Then he came over and picked up the pail. He carried it out onto the roof porch and put it down by the wood frame.

“Thank you,” Billings said. “I appreciate that.” His keen, faded-blue eyes flickered as he studied the boy, his gaunt face shrewd, yet not unkind. “You look pretty strong to me. How old are you? About eleven?”

Tommy nodded. He moved back toward the railing. Below, two or three stories down, was the street. Mr Murphy was walking along, coming home from the office. Some kids were playing at the corner. A young woman across the street was watering her lawn, a blue sweater around her slim shoulders. He was fairly safe. If the old man tried to do anything —

“Why did you come here?” Billings asked.

Tommy said nothing. They stood looking at each other, the stooped old man, immense in his dark old-fashioned suit, the young boy in a red sweater and jeans, a beanie cap on his head, tennis shoes and freckles. Presently Tommy glanced toward the wood frame covered with netting, then up at Billings.

“That? You wanted to see that?”

“What’s in there? What are they?”

“They?”

“The things. Bugs? I never saw anything like them. What are they?”

Billings walked slowly over. He bent down and unfastened the corner of the netting. “I’ll show you what they are. If you’re interested.” He twisted the netting loose and pulled it back.

Tommy came over, his eyes wide.

“Well?” Billings said presently. “You can see what they are.”

Tommy whistled softly. “I thought maybe they were.” He straightened up slowly, his face pale. “I thought maybe — but I wasn’t sure. Little tiny men!”

“Not exactly,” Mr Billings said. He sat down heavily in the rickety chair. From his coat he took a pipe and a worn tobacco pouch. He filled the pipe slowly, shaking tobacco into it. “Not exactly men.”

Tommy continued to gaze down into the frame. The cocoons were tiny huts, put together by the little men. Some of them had come out in the open now. They gazed up at him, standing together. Tiny pink creatures, two inches high. Naked. That was why they were pink.

“Look closer,” Billings murmured. “Look at their heads. What do you see?”

“They’re so small —”

“Go get the glass from the desk. The big magnifying glass.” He watched Tommy hurry into the study and come out quickly with the glass. “Now tell me what you see.”

Tommy examined the figures through the glass. They seemed to be men, all right. Arms, legs — some were women. Their heads. He squinted. And then recoiled.

“What’s the matter?” Billings grunted.

“They’re — they’re queer.”

“Queer?” Billings smiled. “Well, it all depends on what you’re used to. They’re different — from you. But they’re not queer. There’s nothing wrong with them. At least, I hope there’s nothing wrong.” His smile faded, and he sat sucking on his pipe, deep in silent thought.

“Did you make them?” Tommy asked.

“I?” Billings removed his pipe. “No, not I.”

“Where did you get them?”

“They were lent to me. A trial group. In fact, *the* trial group. They’re new. Very new.”

“You want — you want to sell one of them?”

Billings laughed. “No, I don’t. Sorry. I have to keep them.”

Tommy nodded, resuming his study. Through the glass he could see their heads clearly. They were not quite men. From the front of each forehead antennae sprouted, tiny wire-like projections ending in knobs. Like the vanes of insects he had seen. They were not men, but they were similar to men. Except for the antennae they seemed normal — the antennae and their extreme minuteness.

“Did they come from another planet?” Tommy asked. “From Mars? Venus?”

“No.”

“Where, then?”

“That’s a hard question to answer. The question has no meaning, not in connection with them.”

“What’s the report for?”

“The report?”

“In there. The big book with all the facts. The thing you’re doing.”

“I’ve been working on that a long time.”

“How long?”

Billings smiled. “That can’t be answered, either. It has no meaning. But a long time indeed. I’m getting near the end, though.”

“What are you going to do with it? When it’s finished.”

“Turn it over to my superiors.”

“Who are they?”

“You wouldn’t know them.”

“Where are they? Are they here in town?”

“Yes. And no. There’s no way to answer that. Maybe someday you’ll __”

“The report’s about us,” Tommy said.

Billings turned his head. His keen eyes bored into Tommy. “Oh?”

“It’s about us. The report. The book.”

“How do you know?”

“I looked at it. I saw the title on the back. It’s about the earth, isn’t it?”

Billings nodded. “Yes. It’s about the earth.”

“You’re not from here, are you? You’re from someplace else. Outside the system.”

“How — how do you know that?”

Tommmy grinned with superior pride. “I can tell. I have ways.”

“How much did you see in the report?”

“Not much. What’s it for? Why are you making it? What are they going to do with it?”

Billings considered a long time before he answered. At last he spoke. “That,” he said, ‘depends on *those*.” He gestured toward the wood frame. “What they do with the report depends on how Project C works.”

“Project C?”

“The third project. There’ve been only two others before. They wait a long time. Each project is planned carefully. New factors are considered at great length before any decision is reached.”

“Two others?”

“Antennae for these. A complete new arrangement of the cognitive faculties. Almost no dependence on innate drives. Greater flexibility. Some decrease in over-all emotional index, but what they lose in libido energy

they gain in rational control. I would expect more emphasis on individual experience, rather than dependence on traditional group learning. Less stereotyped thinking. More rapid advance in situation control."

Billings's words made little sense. Tommy was lost. "What were the others like?" he asked.

"The others? Project A was a long time ago. It's dim in my mind. Wings."

"Wings."

"They were winged, depending on mobility and possessing considerable individualistic characteristics. In the final analysis we allowed them too much self-dependence. Pride. They had concepts of pride and honor. They were fighters. Each against the others. Divided into atomized antagonistic factions and —"

"What were the rest like?"

Billings knocked his pipe against the railing. He continued, speaking more to himself than to the boy standing in front of him. "The winged type was our first attempt at high-level organisms. Project A. After it failed we went into conference. Project B was the result. We were certain of success. We eliminated many of the excessive individualistic characteristics and substituted a group orientation process. A herd method of learning and experiencing. We hoped general control over the project would be assured. Our work with the first project convinced us that greater supervision would be necessary if we were to be successful."

"What did the second kind look like?" Tommy asked, searching for a meaningful thread in Billings's dissertation.

"We removed the wings, as I said. The general physiognomy remained the same. Although control was maintained for a short time, this second

type also fractured away from the pattern, splintering into self-determined groups beyond our supervision. There is no doubt that surviving members of the initial type A were instrumental in influencing them. We should have exterminated the initial type as soon —”

“Are there any left?”

“Of Project B? Of course.” Billings was irritated. “You’re Project B. That’s why I’m down here. As soon as my report is complete the final disposition of your type can be effected. There is no doubt my recommendation will be identical with that regarding Project A. Since your Project has moved out of jurisdiction to such a degree that for all intents and purposes you are no longer functional —”

But Tommy wasn’t listening. He was bent over the wood frame, peering down at the tiny figures within. Nine little people, men and women both. Nine — and no more in all the world.

Tommy began to tremble. Excitement rushed through him. A plan was dawning, bursting alive inside him. He held his face rigid, his body tense.

“I guess I’ll be going.” He moved from the porch, back into the room toward the hall door.

“Going?” Billings got to his feet. “But —”

“I have to go. It’s getting late. I’ll see you later.” He opened the hall door. “Goodbye.”

“Goodbye,” Mr Billings said, surprised. “I hope I’ll see you again, young man.”

“You will,” Tommy said.

He ran home as fast as he could. He raced up the porch steps and inside the house.

“Just in time for dinner,” his mother said, from the kitchen.

Tommy halted on the stairs. “I have to go out again.”

“No you don’t! You’re going to —”

“Just for awhile. I’ll be right back.” Tommy hurried up to his room and entered, glancing around.

The bright yellow room. Pennants on the walls. The big dresser and mirror, brush and comb, model airplanes, pictures of baseball players. The paper bag of bottle caps. The small radio with its cracked plastic cabinet. The wooden cigar boxes full of junk, odds and ends, things he had collected.

Tommy grabbed up one of the cigar boxes and dumped its contents out on the bed. He stuck the box under his jacket and headed out of the room.

“Where are you going?” his father demanded, lowering his evening newspaper and looking up.

“I’ll be back.”

“Your mother said it was time for dinner. Didn’t you hear her?”

“I’ll be back. This is important.” Tommy pushed the front door open. Chill evening air blew in, cold and thin. “Honest. Real important.”

“Ten minutes.” Vince Jackson looked at his wristwatch. “No longer. Or you don’t get any dinner.”

“Ten minutes.” Tommy slammed the door. He ran down the steps, out into the darkness.

A light showed, flickering under the bottom and through the keyhole of Mr Billings’s room.

Tommy hesitated a moment. Then he raised his hand and knocked. For a time there was silence. Then a stirring sound. The sound of heavy footsteps.

The door opened. Mr Billings peered out into the hall.

“Hello,” Tommy said.

“You’re back!” Mr Billings opened the door wide and Tommy walked quickly into the room. “Did you forget something?”

“No.”

Billings closed the door. “Sit down. Would you like anything? An apple? Some milk?”

“No.” Tommy wandered nervously around the room, touching things here and there, books and papers and bundles of clippings.

Billings watched the boy a moment. Then he returned to his desk, seating himself with a sigh. “I think I’ll continue with my report. I hope to finish very soon.” He tapped a pile of notes beside him. “The last of them. Then I can leave here and present the report along with my recommendations.”

Billings bent over his immense typewriter, tapping steadily away. The relentless rumble of the ancient machine vibrated through the room. Tommy turned and stepped out of the room, onto the porch.

In the cold evening air the porch was pitch black. He halted, adjusting to the darkness. After a time he made out the sacks of fertilizer, the rickety chair. And in the center, the wood frame with its wire netting over it, heaps of dirt and grass piled around.

Tommy glanced back into the room. Billings was bent over the typewriter, absorbed in his work. He had taken off his dark blue coat and hung it over the chair. He was working in his vest, his sleeves rolled up.

Tommy squatted beside the frame. He slid the cigar box from under his jacket and laid it down, lid open. He grasped the netting and pried it back, loose from the row of nails.

From the frame a few faint apprehensive squeaks sounded. Nervous scuttlings among the dried grass.

Tommy reached down, feeling among the grass and plants. His fingers closed over something, a small thing that squirmed in fright, twisting in wild terror. He dropped it into the cigar box and sought another.

In a moment he had them all. Nine of them, all nine in the wood cigar box.

He closed the lid and slipped it back under his jacket. Quickly he left the porch, returning to the room.

Billings glanced up vaguely from his work, pen in one hand, papers in the other. “Did you want to talk to me?” he murmured, pushing up his glasses.

Tommy shook his head. “I have to go.”

“Already? But you just came!”

“I have to go.” Tommy opened the door to the hall. “Goodnight.”

Billings rubbed his forehead wearily, his face lined with fatigue. “All right, boy. Perhaps I’ll see you again before I leave.” He resumed his work, tapping slowly away at the great typewriter, bent with fatigue.

Tommy shut the door behind him. He ran down the stairs, outside on the porch. Against his chest the cigar box shook and moved. Nine. All nine of them. He had them all. Now they were his. They belonged to him — and there weren’t any more of them, anywhere in the world. His plan had worked perfectly.

He hurried down the street toward his own house, as fast as he could run.

He found an old cage out in the garage he had once kept white rats in. He cleaned it and carried it upstairs to his room. He spread papers on the floor of the cage and fixed a water dish and some sand.

When the cage was ready he emptied the contents of the cigar box into it.

The nine tiny figures huddled together in the center of the cage, a little bundle of pink. Tommy shut the door of the cage and fastened it tightly. He carried the cage to the dresser and then drew a chair up by it so he could watch.

The nine little people began to move around hesitantly, exploring the cage. Tommy’s heart beat with rapid excitement as he watched them.

He had got them away from Mr Billings. They were his, now. And Mr Billings didn’t know where he lived or even his name.

They were talking to each other. Moving their antennae rapidly, the way he had seen ants do. One of the little people came over to the side of the cage. He stood gripping the wire, peering out into the room. He was joined

by another, a female. They were naked. Except for the hair on their heads they were pink and smooth.

He wondered what they ate. From the big refrigerator in the kitchen he took some cheese and some hamburger, adding crumbled up bits of bread and lettuce leaves and a little plate of milk.

They liked the milk and bread. But they left the meat alone. The lettuce leaves they used to begin the making of little huts.

Tommy was fascinated. He watched them all the next morning before school, then again at lunch time, and all afternoon until dinner.

“What you got up there?” his Dad demanded, at dinner.

“Nothing.”

“You haven’t got a snake, have you?” his Mom asked apprehensively. “If you have another snake up there, young man —”

“No.” Tommy shook his head, bolting down his meal. “It’s not a snake.”

He finished eating and ran upstairs.

The little creatures had finished fixing their huts out of the lettuce leaves. Some were inside. Others were wandering around the cage, exploring it.

Tommy seated himself before the dresser and watched. They were smart. A lot smarter than the white rats he had owned. And cleaner. They used the sand he had put there for them. They were smart — and quite tame.

After awhile Tommy closed the door of the room. Holding his breath he unfastened the cage, opening one side wide. He reached in his hand and caught one of the little men. He drew him out of the cage and then opened his hand carefully.

The little man clung to his palm, peering over the edge and up at him, antennae waving wildly.

“Don’t be afraid,” Tommy said.

The little man got cautiously to his feet. He walked across Tommy’s palm, to his wrist. Slowly he climbed Tommy’s arm, glancing over the side. He reached Tommy’s shoulder and stopped, gazing up into his face.

“You’re sure small,” Tommy said. He got another one from the cage and put the two of them on the bed. They walked around the bed for a long time. More had come to the open side of the cage and were staring cautiously out onto the dresser. One found Tommy’s comb. He inspected it, tugging at the teeth. A second joined him. The two tiny creatures tugged at the comb, but without success.

“What do you want?” Tommy asked. After a while they gave up. They found a nickel lying on the dresser. One of them managed to turn it up on end. He rolled it. The nickel gained speed, rushing toward the edge of the dresser. The tiny men ran after it in consternation. The nickel fell over the side.

“Be careful,” Tommy warned. He didn’t want anything to happen to them. He had too many plans. It would be easy to rig up things for them to do — like fleas he had seen at the circus. Little carts to pull. Swings, slides. Things they could operate. He could train them, and then charge admission.

Maybe he could take them on tour. Maybe he’d even get a write-up in the newspaper. His mind raced. All kinds of things. Endless possibilities. But he had to start out easy — and be careful.

The next day he took one to school in his pocket, inside a fruit jar. He punched holes in the lid so it could breathe.

At recess he showed it to Dave and Joan Grant. They were fascinated.

“Where did you get it?” Dave demanded.

“That’s my business.”

“Want to sell it?”

“It’s not *it.* It’s him.”

Jean blushed. “It doesn’t have anything on. You better make it put clothes on right away.”

“Can you make clothes for them? I have eight more. Four men and four women.”

Joan was excited. “I can — if you’ll give me one of them.”

“The heck I will. They’re mine.”

“Where did they come from? Who made them?”

“None of your business.”

Joan made little clothes for the four women. Little skirts and blouses. Tommy lowered the clothing into the cage. The little people moved around the heap uncertainly, not knowing what to do.

“You better show them,” Joan said.

“Show them? Nuts to you.”

“I’ll dress them.” Joan took one of the tiny women from the cage and carefully dressed her in a blouse and skirt. She dropped the figure back in. “Now let’s see what happens.”

The others crowded around the dressed woman, plucking curiously at the clothing. Presently they began to divide up the remaining clothes, some taking blouses, some skirts.

Tommy laughed and laughed. “You better make pants for the men. So they’ll all be dressed.”

He took a couple of them out and let them run up and down his arms.

“Be careful,” Joan warned. “You’ll lose them. They’ll get away.”

“They’re tame. They won’t run away. I’ll show you.” Tommy put them down onto the floor. “We have a game. Watch.”

“A game?”

“They hide and I find them.”

The figures scampered off, looking for places to hide. In a moment none were in sight. Tommy got down on his hands and knees, reaching under the dresser, among the bedcovers. A shrill squeak. He had found one.

“See? They like it.” He carried them back to the cage, one by one. The last one stayed hidden a long time. It had got into one of the dresser drawers, down in a bag of marbles, pulling the marbles over its head.

“They’re clever,” Joan said. “Wouldn’t you give me even one of them?”

“No,” Tommy said emphatically. “They’re mine. I’m not letting them get away from me. I’m not giving any of them to *anybody.”*

Tommy met Joan after school the next day. She had made little trousers and shirts for the men.

“Here.” She gave them to him. They walked along the sidewalk. “I hope they fit.”

“Thanks.” Tommy took the clothes and put them in his pocket. They cut across the vacant lot. At the end of the lot Dave Grant and some kids were sitting around in a circle, playing marbles.

“Who’s winning?” Tommy said, stopping.

“I am,” Dave said, not looking up.

“Let me play.” Tommy dropped down. “Come on.” He held out his hand. “Give me your agate.”

Dave shook his head. “Get away.”

Tommy punched him on the arm. “Come on! Just one shot.” He considered. “Tell you what —”

A shadow fell over them.

Tommy looked up. And blanched.

Edward Billings gazed down silently at the boy, leaning on his umbrella, its metal point lost in the soft ground. He said nothing. His aged face was lined and hard, his eyes like faded blue stones.

Tommy got slowly to his feet. Silence had fallen over the children. Some of them scrambled away, snatching up their marbles.

“Wha$_{f}$t do you want?” Tommy demanded. His voice was dry and husky, almost inaudible.

Billings’s cold eyes bored into him, two keen orbs, without warmth of any kind. “You took them. I want them back. Right away.” His voice was hard, colorless. He held out his hand. “Where are they?”

“What are you talking about?” Tommy muttered. He backed away. “I don’t know what you mean.”

“The Project. You stole them from my room. I want them back.”

“The heck I did. What do you mean?”

Billings turned toward Dave Grant. “He’s the one you meant, isn’t he?”

Dave nodded. “I saw them. He has them in his room. He won’t let anybody near them.”

“You came and stole them. *Why?*” Billings moved toward Tommy ominously. “Why did you take them? What do you want with them?”

“You’re crazy,” Tommy murmured, but his voice trembled. Dave Grant said nothing. He looked away sheepishly. “It’s a lie,” Tommy said.

Billings grabbed him. Cold, ancient hands gripped him, digging into his shoulders. “Give them back! I want them. I’m responsible for them.”

“Let go.” Tommy jerked loose. “I don’t have them with me.” He caught his breath. “I mean —”

“Then you do have them. At home. In your room. Bring them there. Go and get them. All nine.”

Tommy put his hands in his pockets. Some of his courage was returning. “I don’t know,” he said. “What’ll you give me?”

Billings’s eyes flashed. “Give you?” He raised his arm threateningly. “Why, you little —”

Tommy jumped back. “You can’t make me return them. You don’t have any control over us.” He grinned boldly. “You said so yourself. We’re out of your power. I heard you say so.”

Billings’s face was like granite. “I’ll take them. They’re mine. They belong to me.”

“If you try to take them I’ll call the cops. And my Dad’ll be there. My Dad and the cops.”

Billings gripped his umbrella. He opened and shut his mouth, his face a dark, ugly red. Neither he nor Tommy spoke. The other kids gazed at the two of them wide-eyed, awed and subdued.

Suddenly a thought twisted across Billings’s face. He looked down at the ground, the crude circle and the marbles. His cold eyes flickered. “Listen to this. I will — I will play against you for them.”

“What?”

“The game. Marbles. If you win you can keep them. If I win I get them back at once. All of them.”

Tommy considered, glancing from Mr Billings down at the circle on the ground. “If I win you won’t ever try to take them? You will let me keep them — for good?”

“Yes.”

“All right.” Tommy moved away. “It’s a deal. If you win you can have them back. But if I win they belong to me. And you don’t ever get them back.”

“Bring them here at once.”

“Sure. I’ll go get them.” — And my agate, too, he thought to himself. “I’ll be right back.”

“I’ll wait here,” Mr Billings said, his huge hands gripping the umbrella.

Tommy ran down the porch steps, two at a time.

His mother came to the door. “You shouldn’t be going out again so late. If you’re not home in half an hour you don’t get any dinner.”

“Half an hour,” Tommy cried, running down the dark sidewalk, his hands pressed against the bulge in his jacket. Against the wood cigar box that moved and squirmed. He ran and ran, gasping for breath.

Mr Billings was still standing by the edge of the lot, waiting silently. The sun had set. Evening was coming. The children had gone home. As Tommy stepped onto the vacant lot a chill, hostile wind moved among the weeds and grass, flapping against his pants legs.

“Did you bring them?” Mr Billings demanded.

“Sure.” Tommy halted, his chest rising and falling. He reached slowly under his jacket and brought out the heavy wood cigar box. He slipped the rubber band off it, lifting the lid a crack. “In here.”

Mr Billings came close, breathing hoarsely. Tommy snapped the lid shut and restored the rubber band. “We have to play.” He put the box down on the ground. “They’re mine — unless you win them back.”

Billings subsided. “All right. Let’s begin, then.”

Tommy searched his pockets. He brought out his agate, holding it carefully. In the fading light the big red-black marble gleamed, rings of sand and white. Like Jupiter. An immense, hard marble.

“Here we go,” Tommy said. He knelt down, sketching a rough circle on the ground. He emptied out a sack of marbles into the ring. “You got any?”

“Any?”

“Marbles. What are you going to shoot with?”

“One of yours.”

“Sure.” Tommy took a marble from the ring and tossed it to him. “Want me to shoot first?”

Billings nodded.

“Fine.” Tommy grinned. He took aim carefully, closing one eye. For a moment his body was rigid, set in an intense, hard arc. Then he shot. Marbles rattled and clinked, rolling out of the circle and into the grass and weeds beyond. He had done well. He gathered up his winnings, collecting them back in the cloth sack.

“Is it my turn?” Billings asked.

“No. My agate’s still in the ring.” Tommy squatted down again. “I get another shot.”

He shot. This time he collected three marbles. Again his agate was within the circle.

“Another shot,” Tommy said, grinning. He had almost half. He knelt and aimed, holding his breath. Twenty-four marbles remained. If he could get four more he would have won. Four more —

He shot. Two marbles left the circle. And his agate. The agate rolled out, bouncing into the weeds.

Tommy collected the two marbles and the agate. He had nineteen in all. Twenty-two remained in the ring.

“Okay,” he murmured reluctantly. “It’s your shot this time. Go ahead.”

Edward Billings knelt down stiffly, gasping and tottering. His face was gray. He turned his marble around in his hand uncertainly.

“Haven’t you ever played before?” Tommy demanded. “You don’t know how to hold it, do you?”

Billings shook his head. “No.”

“You have to get it between your first finger and your thumb.” Tommy watched the stiff old fingers with the marble. Billings dropped it once and picked it quickly up again. “Your thumb makes it go. Like this. Here, I’ll show you.”

Tommy took hold of the ancient fingers and bent them around the marble. Finally he had them in place. “Go ahead.” Tommy straightened up. “Let’s see how you do.”

The old man took a long time. He gazed at the marbles in the ring, his hand shaking. Tommy could hear his breathing, the hoarse, deep panting, in the damp evening air.

The old man glanced at the cigar box resting in the shadows. Then back at the circle. His fingers moved —

There was a flash. A blinding flash. Tommy gave a cry, wiping at his eyes. Everything spun, lashing and tilting. He stumbled and fell, sinking into the wet weeds. His head throbbed. He sat on the ground, rubbing his eyes, shaking his head, trying to see.

At last the drifting sparks cleared. He looked around him, blinking.

The circle was empty. There were no marbles in the ring. Billings had got them all.

Tommy reached out. His fingers touched something hot. He jumped. It was a fragment of glass, a glowing red fragment of molten glass. All round him, in the damp weeds and grass, fragments of glass gleamed, cooling slowly into darkness. A thousand splinters of stars, glowing and fading around him.

Edward Billings stood up slowly, rubbing his hands together. “I’m glad that’s over,” he gasped. “I’m too old to bend down like that.”

His eyes made out the cigar box, lying on the ground.

“Now they can go back. And I can continue with my work.” He picked up the wood box, putting it under his arm. He gathered up his umbrella and snuffled away, toward the sidewalk beyond the lot.

“Goodbye,” Billings said, stopping for a moment. Tommy said nothing.

Billings hurried off down the sidewalk, the cigar box clutched tightly.

He entered his apartment, breathing rapidly. He tossed his black umbrella into the corner and sat down before the desk, laying the cigar box in front of him. For a moment he sat, breathing deeply and gazing down at the brown and white square of wood and cardboard.

He had won. He had got them back. They were his, again. And just in time. The filing date for the report was practically upon him.

Billings slid out of his coat and vest. He rolled up his sleeves, trembling a little. He had been lucky. Control over the B type was extremely limited. They were virtually out of jurisdiction. That, of course, was the problem itself. Both the A and B types had managed to escape supervision. They had rebelled, disobeying orders and therefore putting themselves outside the limit of the plan.

But these — the new type, Project C. Everything depended on them. They had left his hands, but now they were back again. Under control, as intended. Within the periphery of supervisory instruction.

Billings slid the rubber band from the box. He raised the lid, slowly and carefully.

Out they swarmed — fast. Some headed to the right, some to the left. Two columns of tiny figures racing off, head down. One reached the edge of the desk and leaped. He landed on the rug, rolling and falling. A second jumped after him, then a third.

Billings broke out of his paralysis. He grabbed frantically, wildly. Only two remained. He swiped at one and missed. The other —

He grabbed it, squeezing it tight between his clenched fingers. Its companion wheeled. It had something in its hand. A splinter. A splinter of wood, torn from the inside of the cigar box.

It ran up and stuck the end of the splinter into Billings’s finger.

Billings gasped in pain. His fingers flew open. The captive tumbled out, rolling on its back. Its companion helped it up, half-dragging it to the edge of the desk. Together the two of them leaped.

Billings bent down, groping for them. They scampered rapidly, toward the door to the porch. One of them was at the lamp plug. It tugged. A second joined it and the two tiny figures pulled together. The lamp cord came out of the wall. The room plunged into darkness.

Billings found the desk drawer. He yanked it open, spilling its contents onto the floor. He found some big sulphur matches and lit one.

They were gone — out onto the porch.

Billings hurried after them. The match blew out. He lit another, shielding it with his hand.

The creatures had got to the railing. They were going over the edge, catching hold of the ivy and swinging down into the darkness.

He got to the edge too late. They were gone, all of them. All nine, over the side of the roof, into the blackness of the night.

Billings ran downstairs and out onto the back porch. He reached the ground, hurrying around the side of the house, where the ivy grew up the side.

Nothing moved. Nothing stirred. Silence. No sign of them anywhere.

They had escaped. They were gone. They had worked out a plan of escape and put it into operation. Two columns, going in opposite directions, as soon as the lid was lifted. Perfectly timed and executed.

Slowly Billings climbed the stairs to his room. He pushed the door open and stood, breathing deeply, dazed from the shock.

They were gone. Project C was already over. It had gone like the others. The same way. Rebellion and independence. Out of supervision. Beyond

control. Project A had influenced Project B — and now, in the same way, the contamination had spread to C.

Billings sat down heavily at his desk. For a long time he sat immobile, silent and thoughtful, gradual comprehension coming to him. It was not his fault. It had happened before — twice before. And it would happen again. Each Project would carry the discontent to the next. It would never end, no matter how many Projects were conceived and put into operation. The rebellion and escape. The evasion of the plan.

After a time, Billings reached out and pulled his big report book to him. Slowly he opened it to the place he had left off. From the report he removed the entire last section. The summary. There was no use scrapping the current Project. One Project was as good as any other. They would all be equal — equal failures.

He had known as soon as he saw them. As soon as he had raised the lid. They had clothes on. Little suits of clothing. Like the others, a long time before.

The Trouble with Bubbles

Nathan Hull left his surface car and crossed the pavement on foot, sniffing the chill morning air. Robot work-trucks were starting to rumble past. A gutter slot sucked night debris greedily. A vanishing headline caught his eye momentarily:

PACIFIC TUBE COMPLETED;

ASIAN LAND MASS LINKED

He passed on away from the corner, hands in his pockets, looking for Farley's house.

Past the usual Worldcraft Store with its conspicuous motto: "Own Your Own World!" Down a short grass-lined walk and onto a sloping tilt-front porch. Up three imitation marble stairs. Then Hull flicked his hand before the code beam and the door melted away.

The house was still. Hull found the ascent tube to the second floor and peered up. No sound. Warm air blew around him, tinged with faint smells — smells of food and people and familiar objects. Had they gone? No. It was only the third day; they'd be around someplace, maybe up on the roof terrace.

He ascended to the second floor and found it also vacant. But distant sounds drifted to his ears. A tinkle of laughter, a man's voice. A woman's — perhaps Julia's. He hoped so — hoped she were still conscious.

He tried a door at random, steeling himself. Sometimes during the third and fourth days the Contest Parties got a little rough. The door melted, but the room was empty. Couches, empty glasses, ashtrays, exhausted stimulant tubes, articles of clothing strewn everywhere —

Abruptly Julia Marlow and Max Farley appeared, arm in arm, followed by several others, pushing forward in a group, excited, and red-cheeked, eyes bright, almost feverish. They entered the room and halted.

“Nat!” Julia broke away from Farley and came breathlessly up to him. “Is it that late already?”

“Third day,” Hull said. “Hello, Max.”

“Hello, Hull. Sit down and make yourself comfortable. Can I get you something?”

“Nothing. Can’t stay. Julia —”

Farley waved a robant over, sweeping two drinks from its chest tray. “Here, Hull. You can stay long enough for one drink.”

Bart Longstreet and a slender blonde appeared through a door. “Hull! You here? So soon?”

“Third day. I’m picking Julia up. If she still wants to leave.”

“Don’t take her away,” the slim blonde protested. She wore a *sideglance* robe, invisible out of the corner of the eye, but an opaque fountain when looked at directly. “They’re judging right now. In the lounge. Stick around. The fun’s just beginning.” She winked at him with heavy blue-lidded eyes, glazed and sleep-drugged.

Hull turned to Julia. “If you want to stay…”

Julia put her hand nervously on his arm, standing close to him. Not losing her fixed smile she grated in his ear: “Nat, for God’s sake, get me out of here. I can’t stand it. Please!”

Hull caught her intense appeal, her eyes bright with desperation. He could feel the mute urgency quivering through her body, tense and strained.

“Okay, Julia. We’ll take off. Maybe get some breakfast. When did you last eat?”

“Two days. I think. I don’t know.” Her voice trembled. “They’re judging right now. God, Nat, you should have seen —”

“Can’t go until the judging’s over,” Farley rumbled. “I think they’re almost through. You didn’t enter, Hull? No entry for you?”

“No entry.”

“Surely you’re an owner —”

“Nope. Sorry.” Hull’s voice was faintly ironic. “No world of my own, Max. Can’t see it.”

“You’re missing something.” Max beamed dopily, rocking back on his heels. “Quite a time — best Contest Party for weeks. And the real fun begins *after* the judging. All this is just preliminary.”

“I know.” Hull moved Julia rapidly toward the descent tube. “We’ll see you. So long, Bart. Give me a call when you’re out of here.”

“Hold it!” Bart murmured suddenly, cocking his head. “The judging’s over. The winner is going to be announced.” He pushed toward the lounge, the others excitedly behind. “You coming, Hull? Julia?”

Hull glanced at the girl. “All right.” They followed reluctantly. “For a minute, maybe.”

A wall of sound struck them. The lounge was a seething chaos of milling men and women.

“I won!” Lora Becker shouted in ecstasy. People pushed and shoved around her, toward the Contest table, grabbing up their entries. Their voices

grew in volume, an ominous rumble of discordant sound. Robants calmly moved furniture and fixtures back out of the way, clearing the floor rapidly. An unleashed frenzy of mounting hysteria was beginning to fill the big room.

"I knew it!" Julia's fingers tightened around Hull's arm. "Come on. Let's get out before they start."

"Start?"

"Listen to them!" Julia's eyes flickered with fear. "Come on, Nat! I've had enough. I can't stand any more of this."

"I told you before you came."

"You did, didn't you?" Julia smiled briefly, grabbing her coat from a robant. She fastened the coat rapidly around her breasts and shoulders. "I admit it. You told me. Now let's go, for God's sake." She turned, making her way through the surging mass of people toward the descent tube. "Let's get out of here. We'll have breakfast. You were right. These things aren't for us."

Lora Becker, plump and middle-aged, was making her way up onto the stand beside the judges, her entry clasped in her arms. Hull paused a moment, watching the immense woman struggle up, her chemically corrected features gray and sagging in the unwinking overhead lights. The third day — a lot of old-timers were beginning to show the effects, even through their artificial masks.

Lora reached the stand. "Look!" she shouted, holding up her entry. The Worldcraft bubble glittered, catching the light. In spite of himself Hull had to admire the thing. If the actual world inside was as good as the exterior…

Lora turned on the bubble. It glowed, winking into brilliance. The roomful of people became silent, gazing up at the winning entry, the world

that had taken the prize over all other comers.

Lora Becker's entry was masterful. Even Hull had to admit it. She increased the magnification, bringing the microscopic central planet into focus. A murmur of admiration swept the room.

Again Lora increased the magnification. The central planet grew, showing a pale green ocean lapping faintly at a low shoreline. A city came into view, towers and broad streets, fine ribbons of gold and steel. Above, twin suns beamed down, warming the city. Myriads of inhabitants swarmed about their activities.

"Wonderful," Bart Longstreet said softly, coming over beside Hull. "But the old hag has been at it sixty years. No wonder she won. She's entered every Contest I can remember."

"It's nice," Julia admitted in a clipped voice.

"You don't care for it?" Longstreet asked.

"I don't care for any of this!"

"She wants to go," Hull explained, moving toward the descent tube. "We'll see you later, Bart."

Bart Longstreet nodded. "I know what you mean. In many ways I agree. You mind if I —"

"Watch!" Lora Becker shouted, her face flushed. She increased the magnification to maximum focus, showing details of the minute city. "See them? *See?"*

The inhabitants of the city came into sharp view. They hurried about their business, endless thousands of them. In cars and on foot. Across spidery spans between buildings, breathtakingly beautiful.

Lora held the Worldcraft bubble up high, breathing rapidly. She gazed around the room, her eyes bright and inflamed, glittering unhealthily. The murmurings rose, sweeping up in excitement. Numerous Worldcraft bubbles came up, chest-high, gripped in eager, impassioned hands.

Lora's mouth opened. Saliva dribbled down the creases of her sagging face. Her lips twitched. She raised her bubble up over her head, her doughy chest swelling convulsively. Suddenly her face jerked, features twisting wildly. Her thick body swayed grotesquely — and from her hands the Worldcraft bubble flew, crashing to the stand in front of her.

The bubble smashed, bursting into a thousand pieces. Metal and glass, plastic parts, gears, struts, tubes, the vital machinery of the bubble, splattered in all directions.

Pandemonium broke loose. All around the room other owners were smashing their worlds, breaking them and crushing them, stamping on them, grinding the delicate control mechanisms underfoot. Men and women in a frenzy of abandon, released by Lora Becker's signal, quivering in an orgy of Dionysian lust. Crushing and breaking their carefully constructed worlds, one after another.

"God," Julia gasped, struggling to get away, Longstreet and Hull beside her.

Faces gleamed with sweat, eyes feverish and bright. Mouths gaped foolishly, muttering meaningless sounds. Clothes were torn, ripped off. A girl went down, sliding underfoot, her shrieks lost in the general din. Another followed, dragged down into the milling mass. Men and women struggled in a blur of abandon, cries and gasps. And on all sides the hideous sounds of smashing metal and glass, the unending noise of worlds being destroyed one after another.

Julia dragged Hull from the lounge, her face white. She shuddered, closing her eyes. “I knew it was coming. Three days, building up to this. Smashed — they’re smashing them all. All the worlds.”

Bart Longstreet made his way out after Hull and Julia. “Lunatics.” He lit a cigarette shakily. “What the hell gets into them? This has happened before. They start breaking, smashing their worlds up. It doesn’t make sense.”

Hull reached the descent tube. “Come along with us, Bart. We’ll have breakfast — and I’ll give you my theory, for what it’s worth.”

“Just a second.” Bart Longstreet scooped up his Worldcraft bubble from the arms of a robant. “My Contest entry. Don’t want to lose it.”

He hurried after Julia and Hull.

“More coffee?” Hull asked, looking around.

“None for me,” Julia murmured. She settled back in her chair, sighing. “I’m perfectly happy.”

“I’ll take some.” Bart pushed his cup toward the coffee dispenser. It filled the cup and returned it. “You’ve got a nice little place here, Hull.”

“Haven’t you seen it before?”

“I don’t get up this way. I haven’t been in Canada in years.”

“Let’s hear your theory,” Julia murmured.

“Go ahead,” Bart said. “We’re waiting.”

Hull was silent for a moment. He gazed moodily across the table, past the dishes, at the thing sitting on the window ledge. Bart's Contest entry, his Worldcraft bubble.

" 'Own Your Own World'," Hull quoted ironically. "Quite a slogan."

"Packman thought it up himself," Bart said. "When he was young. Almost a century ago."

"That long?"

"Packman takes treatments. A man in his position can afford them."

"Of course." Hull got slowly to his feet. He crossed the room and returned with the bubble. "Mind?" he asked Bart.

"Go ahead."

Hull adjusted the controls mounted on the bubble's surface. The interior scene flickered into focus. A miniature planet, revolving slowly. A tiny blue-white sun. He increased the magnification, bringing the planet up in size.

"Not bad," Hull admitted presently.

"Primitive. Late Jurassic. I don't have the knack. I can't seem to get them into the mammal stage. This is my sixteenth try. I never can get any farther than this."

The scene was a dense jungle, steaming with fetid rot. Great shapes stirred fitfully among the decaying ferns and marshes. Coiled, gleaming, reptilian bodies, smoking shapes rising up from the thick mud —

"Turn it off," Julia murmured. "I've seen enough of them. We viewed hundreds for the Contest."

“I didn’t have a chance.” Bart retrieved his bubble, snapping it off. “You have to do better than the Jurassic, to win. Competition is keen. Half the people there had their bubbles into the Eocene — and at least ten into the Pliocene. Lora’s entry wasn’t much ahead. I counted several city-building civilizations. But hers was almost as advanced as we are.”

“Sixty years,” Julia said.

“She’s been trying a long time. She’s worked hard. One of those to whom it’s not a game but a real passion. A way of life.”

“And then she smashes it,” Hull said thoughtfully. “Smashes the bubble to bits. A world she’s been working on for years. Guiding it through period after period. Higher and higher. Smashes it into a million pieces.”

“Why?” Julia asked. “Why, Nat? Why do they do it? They get so far, building it up — and then they tear it all down again.”

Hull leaned back in his chair. “It began,” he stated, “when we failed to find life on any of the other planets. When our exploring parties came back empty-handed. Eight dead orbs — lifeless. Good for nothing. Not even lichen. Rock and sand. Endless deserts. One after the other, all the way out to Pluto.”

“It was a hard realization,” Bart said. “Of course, that was before our time.”

“Not much before. Packman remembers it. A century ago. We waited a long time for rocket travel, flight to other planets. And then to find nothing…”

“Like Columbus finding the world really was flat,” Julia said. “With an edge and a void.”

“Worse. Columbus was looking for a short route to China. They *could* have continued the long way. But when we explored the system and found nothing we were in for trouble. People had counted on new worlds, new lands in the sky. Colonization. Contact with a variety of races. Trade. Minerals and cultural products to exchange. But most of all the thrill of landing on planets with amazing life-forms.”

“And instead of that…”

“Nothing but dead rock and waste. Nothing that could support life — our own or any other kind. A vast disappointment set in on all levels of society.”

“And then Packman brought out the Worldcraft bubble,” Bart murmured. ” ‘Own Your Own World.’ There was no place to go, outside of Terra. No other worlds to visit. You couldn’t leave here and go to another world. So instead, you —”

“Instead you stayed home and put together your own world.” Hull smiled wryly. “You know, he has a child’s version out, now. A sort of preparation kit. So the child can cover the basic problems of world-building before he even has a bubble.”

“But look, Nat,” Bart said. “The bubbles seemed like a good idea, at first. We couldn’t leave Terra so we built our own worlds right here. Sub-atomic worlds, in controlled containers. We start life going on a sub-atomic world, feed it problems to make it evolve, try to raise it higher and higher. In theory there’s nothing wrong with the idea. It’s certainly a creative pastime. Not a merely passive viewing like television. In fact, world-building is the ultimate art form. It takes the place of all entertainments, all the passive sports as well as music and painting —”

“But something went wrong.”

“Not at first,” Bart objected. “At first it was creative. Everybody bought a Worldcraft bubble and built his own world. Evolved life farther and farther. Molded life. Controlled it. Competed with others to see who could achieve the most advanced world.”

“And it solved another problem,” Julia added. “The problem of leisure. With robots to work for us and robants to serve us and take care of our needs —”

“Yes, that was a problem,” Hull admitted. “Too much leisure. Nothing to do. That, and the disappointment of finding our planet the only habitable planet in the system.

“Packman’s bubbles seemed to solve both problems. But something went wrong. A change came. I noticed it right away.” Hull stubbed out his cigarette and lit another. The change began ten years ago — and it’s been growing worse.”

“But why?” Julie demanded. “Explain to me why everyone stopped building their worlds creatively and began to destroy.”

“Ever seen a child pull wings off a fly?”

“Certainly. But —”

“The same thing. Sadism? No, not exactly. More a sort of curiosity. Power. Why does a child break things? Power, again. We must never forget something. These world bubbles are *substitutes*. They take the place of something else, of finding genuine life on our own planets. And they’re just too damn small to do that.

“These worlds are like toy boats in a bath tub. Or model rocketships you see kids playing with. They’re surrogates, not the actual thing. These people who operate them — why do they want them? Because they can’t explore

real planets, big planets. They have a lot of energy dammed up inside them. Energy they can't express.

"And bottled-up energy sours. It becomes aggressive. People work with their little worlds for a time, building them up. But finally they reach a point where their latent hostility, their sense of being deprived, their —"

"It can be explained more easily," Bart said calmly. "Your theory is too elaborate."

"How do you explain it?"

"Man's innate destructive tendencies. His natural desire to kill and spread ruin."

"There's no such thing," Hull said flatly. "Man isn't an ant. He has no fixed direction to his drives. He has no instinctive 'desire to destroy' any more than he had an instinctive desire to carve ivory letter-openers. He has *energy* — and the outlet it takes depends on the opportunities available. That's what's wrong. All of us have energy, the desire to move, act, do. But we're bottled up here, sealed off, on one planet. So we buy Worldcraft bubbles and make little worlds of our own. But microscopic worlds aren't enough. They're as satisfactory as a toy sailboat is to a man who wants to go sailing."

Bart considered a long time, deep in thought. "You may be right," he admitted finally. "It sounds reasonable. But what's your suggestion? If the other eight planets are dead —"

"Keep exploring. Beyond the system."

"We're doing that."

"Try to find outlets that aren't so artificial."

Bart grinned. “You feel this way because you never caught the hang of it.” He thumped his bubble fondly. “I don’t find it artificial.”

“But most people do,” Julia put in. “Most people aren’t satisfied. That’s why we left the Contest Party.”

Bart grunted. “It’s turning sour, all right. Quite a scene, wasn’t it?” He reflected, frowning. “But the bubbles are better than nothing. What do you suggest? Give up our bubbles? What should we do instead? Just sit around and talk?”

“Nat loves to talk,” Julia murmured.

“Like all intellectuals.” Bart tapped Hull’s sleeve. “When you sit in your seat in the Directorate you’re with the Intellectual and Professional class — gray stripe.”

“And you?”

“Blue stripe. Industrial. You know that.”

Hull nodded. “That’s right. You’re with Terran Spaceways. The ever-hopeful company.”

“So you want us to give up our bubbles and just sit around. Quite a solution to the problem.”

“You’re going to *have* to give them up.” Hull’s face flushed. “What you do after that is your affair.”

“What do you mean?”

Hull turned toward Longstreet, eyes blazing. “I’ve introduced a bill in the Directorate. A bill that will outlaw Worldcraft.”

Bart’s mouth fell open. “You *what?”*

“On what grounds?” Julia asked, waking up.

“On moral grounds,” Hull stated calmly. “And I think I can get it through.”

The Directorate hall buzzed with murmuring echoes, its vast reaches alive with moving shadows, men taking their places and preparing for the session’s business.

Eldon von Stern, Directorate Floor Leader, stood with Hull off to one side behind the platform. “Let’s get this straight,” von Stern said nervously, running his fingers through his iron-gray hair. “You intend to *speak* for this bill of yours? You want to defend it yourself?”

Hull nodded. “That’s right. Why not?”

“The analytical machines can break the bill down and present an impartial report for the members. Spellbinding has gone out of style. If you present an emotional harangue you can be certain of losing. The members won’t —”

“I’ll take the chance. It’s too important to leave to the machines.”

Hull gazed out over the immense room that was slowly quieting. Representatives from all over the world were in their places. White-clad property owners. Blue-clad financial and industrial magnates. The red shirts of leaders from factory cooperatives and communal farms. The green-clad men and women representing the middle-class consumer group. His own gray-striped body, at the extreme right, the doctors, lawyers, scientists, educators, intellectuals and professionals of all kinds.

“I’ll take the chance,” Hull repeated. “I want to see the bill passed. It’s time the issues were made clear.”

Von Stern shrugged. “Suit yourself.” He eyed Hull curiously. “What do you have against Worldcraft? It’s too powerful a combine to buck. Packman himself is here, someplace. I’m surprised you —”

The robot chair flashed a signal. Von Stern moved away from Hull, up onto the platform.

“Are you sure you want to speak for the bill?” Julia said, standing beside Hull in the shadows. “Maybe he’s right. Let the machines analyze the bill.”

Hull was gazing out across the sea of faces, trying to locate Packman. The owner of Worldcraft was sitting out there. Forrest Packman, in his immaculate white shirt, like an ancient, withered angel. Packman preferred to sit with the property group, considering Worldcraft real estate instead of industry. Property still had the edge on prestige.

Von Stern touched Hull’s arm. “All right. Take the chair and explain your proposal.”

Hull stepped out onto the platform and seated himself in the big marble chair. The endless rows of faces before him were carefully devoid of expression.

“You’ve read the terms of the proposal I’m speaking for,” Hull began, his voice magnified by the speakers on each member’s desk. “I propose we should declare Worldcraft Industries a public menace and the real property the possession of the State. I can state my grounds in a few sentences.

“The theory and construction of the Worldcraft product, the sub-atomic universe system, is known to you. An infinite number of sub-atomic worlds exist, microscopic counterparts of our own spatial coordinate. Worldcraft developed, almost a century ago, a method of controlling to thirty decimals the forces and stresses involved on these micro-coordinate planes, and a fairly simplified machine which could be manipulated by an adult person.

“These machines for controlling specific areas of sub-atomic coordinates have been manufactured and sold to the general public with the slogan: ‘Own Your Own World.’ The idea is that the owner of the machine becomes literally a world owner, since the machine controls forces that govern a sub-atomic universe that is directly analogous to our own.

“By purchasing one of these Worldcraft machines, or bubbles, the person finds himself in possession of a virtual universe, to do with as he sees fit. Instruction manuals supplied by the Company show him how to control these minute worlds so that life forms appear and rapidly evolve, giving rise to higher and higher forms until at last — assuming the owner is sufficiently skillful — he has in his personal possession a civilization of beings on a cultural par with our own.

“During the last few years we have seen the sale of these machines grow until now almost everyone possesses one or more sub-atomic worlds, complete with civilizations, and these years have also seen many of us take our private universes and grind the inhabitants and planets into dust.

“There is no law which prevents us from building up elaborate civilizations, evolved at an incredible rate of speed, and then crushing them out of existence. That is why my proposal has been presented. These minute civilizations are not dreams. They are real. They actually exist. The microscopic inhabitants are —”

A restless stir moved through the vast hall. There were murmurs and coughs. Some members had switched off their speakers. Hull hesitated. A chill touched him. The faces below were blank, cold, uninterested. He continued rapidly.

“The inhabitants are, at present, subject to the slightest whim their owner may feel. If we wish to reach down and crush their world, turn on tidal waves, earthquakes, tornados, fire, volcanic action — if we wish to destroy them utterly, there is nothing they can do.

“Our position in relation to these minute civilizations is godlike. We can, with a wave of the hand, obliterate countless millions. We can send the lightning down, level their cities, squash their tiny buildings like ant hills. We can toss them about like toys, playthings, victims of our every whim.”

Hull stopped, rigid with apprehension. Some of the members had risen and strolled out. Von Stern’s face twisted with ironic amusement.

Hull continued lamely. “I want to see Worldcraft bubbles outlawed. We owe it to these civilizations on humanitarian grounds, on moral grounds —”

He went on, finishing as best he could. When he got to his feet there was a faint ripple of applause from the gray-striped professional group. But the white-clad property owners were utterly silent. And the blue industrialists. The red shirts and the green-clad consumer representatives were silent, impassive, even a little amused.

Hull returned to the wings, cold with the stark realization of defeat. “We’ve lost,” he muttered, dazed. “I don’t understand.”

Julia took his arm. “Maybe an appeal on some other grounds… Maybe the machines can still —”

Bart Longstreet came out of the shadows. “No good, Nat. Won’t work.”

Hull nodded. “I know.”

“You can’t moralize Worldcraft away. That’s not the solution.”

Von Stern had given the signal. The members began to cast their votes, the tabulation machines whirring to life. Hull stood staring silently out at the murmuring room, crushed and bewildered.

Suddenly a shape appeared in front of him, cutting off his view. Impatiently he moved to one side — but a rasping voice stopped him.

“Too bad, Mr Hull. Better luck next time.”

Hull stiffened. “Packman!” he muttered. “What do you want?”

Forrest Packman came out of the shadows, moving toward him slowly, feeling his way blindly along.

Bart Longstreet stared at the old man with unconcealed hostility. “I’ll see you later, Nat.” He turned abruptly and started off.

Julia stopped him. “Bart, do you have to —”

“Important business. I’ll be back later.” He moved off down the aisle, toward the industrial section of the hall.

Hull faced Packman. He had never seen the old man so close before. He studied him as he advanced slowly, feeling his way along on the arm of his robant.

Forrest Packman was old — a hundred and seven years. Preserved by hormones and blood transfusions, elaborate washing and rejuvenating processes that maintained life in his ancient, withered body. His eyes, deep-sunk, peered up at Hull as he came near, shrunken hands clutching the arm of his robant, breath coming hoarse and dry.

“Hull? You don’t mind if I chat with you as the voting goes on? I won’t be long.” He peered blindly past Hull. “Who left? I couldn’t see —”

“Bart Longstreet. Spaceways.”

“Oh, yes. I know him. Your speech was quite interesting, Hull. It reminded me of the old days. These people don’t remember how it was. Times have changed.” He stopped, letting the robant wipe his mouth and chin. “I used to be interested in rhetoric. Some of the old masters…”

The old man rambled on. Hull studied him curiously. Was this frail withered old man really the power behind Worldcraft? It didn't seem possible.

"Bryan," Packman whispered, voice dry as ashes. "William Jennings Bryan. I never heard him, of course. But they say he was the greatest. Your speech wasn't bad. But you don't understand. I listened carefully. You have some good ideas. But what you're trying to do is absurd. You don't know enough about people. Nobody's really interested in —"

He broke off, coughing feebly, his robant gripping him with metal supports.

Hull pushed impatiently past. "The voting is almost finished. I want to hear. If you have anything to say to me you can file a regular memo plate."

Packman's robant stepped out, barring his way. Packman went on slowly, shakily. "Nobody is really interested in such appeals, Hull. You made a good speech but you don't have the idea. Not yet, at least. But you talk well, better than I've heard for a long time. These young fellows, faces all washed, running around like office boys —"

Hull strained, listening to the vote. The impassive robant body cut off his view, but over Packman's dry rasp he could hear the results. Von Stern had risen and was reading the totals, group by group.

Tour hundred against, thirty-five in favor," von Stern stated. The proposal has been defeated." He tossed the tabulation cards down and picked up his agenda. "We'll continue with the next business."

Behind Hull, Packman broke off suddenly, his skull-like head cocked on one side. His deep-sunk eyes glittered and the trace of a smile twitched across his lips. "Defeated? Not even all the grays voted for you, Hull. Now maybe you'll listen to what I have to say."

Hull turned away from the hall. The robant lowered its arm. “It’s over,” Hull said.

“Come on.” Julia moved uneasily away from Packman. “Let’s get out of here.”

“You see,” Packman continued relentlessly, “you have potentials that could be developed into something. When I was your age I had the same idea you have. I thought if people could see the moral issues involved, they would respond. But people aren’t like that. You have to be realistic, if you want to get somewhere. People…”

Hull scarcely heard the dry, raspy voice whispering away. Defeat. Worldcraft, the world bubbles, would continue. The Contest Parties: bored, restless men and women with too much time, drinking and dancing, comparing worlds, building up to the climax — then the orgy of breaking and smashing. Over and over. Endlessly.

“Nobody can buck Worldcraft,” Julia said. “It’s too big. We’ll have to accept the bubbles as part of our lives. As Bart says, unless we have something else to offer in their place…”

Bart Longstreet came rapidly out of the shadows. “You still here?” he said to Packman.

“I lost,” Hull said. The vote —”

“I know. I heard it. But it doesn’t matter.” Longstreet pushed past Packman and his robant. “Stay here. I’ll join you in a second. I have to see von Stern.”

Something in Longstreet’s voice made Hull look up sharply. “What is it? What’s happened?”

“Why doesn’t it matter?” Julia demanded. Longstreet stepped up on the platform and made his way to von Stern. He handed him a message plate and then retired to the shadows.

Von Stern glanced at the plate —

And stopped talking. He got to his feet slowly, the plate gripped tightly. “I have an announcement to make.” Von Stern’s voice was shaking, almost inaudible. “A dispatch from Spaceways’ check station on Proxima Centauri.” An excited murmur rushed through the hall. “Exploring ships in the Proxima system have contacted trading scouts from an extra-galactic civilization. An exchange of messages has already occurred. Spaceways ships are moving toward the Arcturan system with the expectation of finding —” Shouts, a bedlam of sound. Men and women on their feet, screaming in wild joy. Von Stern stopped reading and stood, his arms folded, his gray face calm, waiting for them to quiet.

Forrest Packman stood unmoving, his withered hands pressed together, his eyes shut. His robant sent support braces around him, catching him in a shield of protecting metal.

“Well?” Longstreet shouted, pushing back to them. He glanced at the frail, withered figure held up by the robant’s supports, then at Hull and Julia. “What do you say, Hull? Let’s get out of here — so we can celebrate.”

“I’ll fly you home,” Hull said to Julia. He looked around for an inter-continental cruiser. “Too bad you live so far away. Hong Kong is so damn out of the way.”

Julia caught his arm. “You can drive me yourself. Remember? The Pacific Tube is open. We’re connected with Asia now.”

“That’s right.” Hull opened the door of his surface car and Julia slid in. Hull got behind the wheel and slammed the door. “I forgot, with all these other things on my mind. Maybe we can see each other more often. I

wouldn’t mind spending a few days’ vacation in Hong Kong. Maybe you’ll invite me.”

He sent the car out into traffic, moving with the remote-controlled beam. “Tell me more,” Julia asked. “I want to know all Bart said.”

“Not much more. They’ve known for some time that something was up. That’s why he wasn’t too worried about Worldcraft. He knew the bottom would fall out as soon as the announcement was made.”

“Why didn’t he tell you?”

Hull grinned wryly. “How could he? Suppose the first reports were wrong? He wanted to wait until they were sure. He knew what the results would be.” Hull gestured. “Look.”

On both sides of the strip a tide of men and women poured out of buildings, up from the underground factories, a seething mass milling everywhere in disordered confusion, shouting and cheering, throwing things in the air, tossing paper out of windows, carrying each other on their shoulders.

“They’re working it off,” Hull said. “The way it should be. Bart says Arcturus is supposed to have seven or eight fertile planets, some of them inhabited, some just forests and oceans. The extra-galactic traders say that most systems have at least one usable planet. They visited our system a long time ago. Our early ancestors may have traded with them.”

“Then there’s plenty of life in the galaxy?”

Hull laughed. “If what they say is true. And the fact that *they* exist is proof enough.”

“No more Worldcraft.”

“No.” Hull shook his head. No more Worldcraft. Stock was already being dumped. Worthless. Probably the State would absorb the bubbles already in existence and seal them off, leaving the inhabitants free to determine their own futures.

The neurotic smashing of laboriously achieved cultures was a thing of the past. The buildings of living creatures would no longer be pushed over to amuse some god suffering from *ennui* and frustration.

Julia laughed, leaning against Hull. “Now we can take it easy. Sure, you’re invited to stay. We can take out permanent cohabitation papers if you want to —”

Hull leaned forward suddenly, his body rigid. “Where’s the Tube?” he demanded. The strip should be hitting it any minute.”

Julia peered ahead, frowning. “Something’s wrong. Slow down.”

Hull slowed the car. An obstruction signal was flashing ahead. Cars were stopping on all sides, shifting into emergency retard lanes.

He ground the car to a halt. Rocket cruisers were sweeping overhead, exhaust tubes shattering the evening silence. A dozen uniformed men ran across a field, directing a rumbling robot derrick.

“What the hell —” Hull muttered. A soldier stepped up to the car, swinging a communication flare.

“Turn around. We need the whole strip.”

“But -”

“What happened?” Julia asked.

“The Tube. Earthquake, someplace halfway out. Broke the Tube in ten sections.” The soldier hurried off. Construction robots rushed past in a hand cart, assembling equipment as they went.

Julia and Hull stared at each other wide-eyed. “Good Lord,” Hull muttered. “Ten places. And the Tube must have been full of cars.”

A Red Cross ship landed, its ports grating open. Dollies shuttled across to it, loading injured men.

Two relief workers appeared. They opened the door to Hull’s car, getting in the back. “Drive us to town.” They sank down, exhausted. “We got to get more help. Hurry it.”

“Sure.” Hull started the car again, gained speed.

“How did it happen?” Julia asked one of the grim-faced exhausted men, who dabbed automatically at the cuts on his face and neck.

“Earthquake.”

“But why? Didn’t they build it so —”

“Big quake.” The man shook his head wearily. “Nobody expected. Total loss. Thousands of cars. Tens of thousands of people.”

The other worker grunted. “An act of God.”

Hull stiffened suddenly. His eyes flickered.

“What is it?” Julia asked him.

“Nothing.”

“Are you sure? Is something wrong?”

Hull said nothing. He was deep in thought, his face a mask of startled, growing horror.

Breakfast at Twilight

“Dad?” Earl asked, hurrying out of the bathroom, “you going to drive us to school today?”

Tim McLean poured himself a second cup of coffee. “You kids can walk for a change. The car’s in the garage.”

Judy pouted. “It’s raining.”

“No it isn’t,” Virginia corrected her sister. She drew the shade back. “It’s all foggy, but it isn’t raining.”

“Let me look.” Mary McLean dried her hands and came over from the sink. “What an odd day. Is that fog? It looks more like smoke. I can’t make out a thing. What did the weatherman say?”

“I couldn’t get anything on the radio,” Earl said. “Nothing but static.”

Tim stirred angrily. “That darn thing on the blink again? Seems like I just had it fixed.” He got up and moved sleepily over to the radio. He fiddled idly with the dials. The three children hurried back and forth, getting ready for school. “Strange,” Tim said.

“I’m going.” Earl opened the front door.

“Wait for your sisters,” Mary ordered absently.

“I’m ready,” Virginia said. “Do I look all right?”

“You look fine,” Mary said, kissing her.

“I’ll call the radio repair place from the office,” Tim said.

He broke off. Earl stood at the kitchen door, pale and silent, his eyes wide with terror.

“What is it?”

“I — I came back.”

“What is it? Are you sick?”

“I can’t go to school.”

They stared at him. “What is wrong?” Tim grabbed his son’s arm. “Why can’t you go to school?”

“They — they won’t let me.”

“Who?”

“The soldiers.” It came tumbling out with a rush. “They’re all over. Soldiers and guns. And they’re coming here.”

“Coming? Coming here?” Tim echoed, dazed.

“They’re coming here and they’re going to —” Earl broke off, terrified. From the front porch came the sound of heavy boots. A crash. Splintering wood. Voices.

“Good Lord,” Mary gasped. “What is it, Tim?”

Tim entered the livingroom, his heart laboring painfully. Three men stood inside the door. Men in gray-green uniforms, weighted with guns and complex tangles of equipment. Tubes and hoses. Meters on thick cords. Boxes and leather straps and antennae. Elaborate masks locked over their

heads. Behind the masks Tim saw tired, whisker-stubbled faces, red-rimmed eyes that gazed at him in brutal displeasure.

One of the soldiers jerked up his gun, aiming at McLean's middle. Tim peered at it dumbly. *The gun.* Long and thin. Like a needle. Attached to a coil of tubes.

"What in the name of —" he began, but the soldier cut him off savagely.

"Who are you?" His voice was harsh, guttural. "What are you doing here?" He pushed his mask aside. His skin was dirty. Cuts and pocks lined his sallow flesh. His teeth were broken and missing.

"Answer!" a second soldier demanded. "What are you doing here?"

"Show your blue card," the third said. "Let's see your Sector number." His eyes strayed to the children and Mary standing mutely at the dining-room door. His mouth fell open.

"A woman?"

The three soldiers gazed in disbelief.

"What the hell is this?" the first demanded. "How long has this woman been here?"

Tim found his voice. "She's my wife. What is this? What —"

"Your *wife?"* They were incredulous.

"My wife and children. For God's sake —"

"Your wife? And you'd bring her here? You must be out of your head!"

“He’s got ash sickness,” one said. He lowered his gun and strode across the livingroom to Mary. “Come on, sister. You’re coming with us.”

Tim lunged.

A wall of force hit him. He sprawled, clouds of darkness rolling around him. His ears sang. His head throbbed. Everything receded. Dimly, he was aware of shapes moving. Voices. The room. He concentrated.

The soldiers were herding the children back. One of them grabbed Mary by the arm. He tore her dress away, ripping it from her shoulders. “Gee,” he snarled. “He’d bring her here, and she’s not even strung!”

“Take her along.”

“Okay, Captain.” The soldier dragged Mary toward the front door. “We’ll do what we can with her.”

“The kids.” The captain waved the other soldier over with the children. “Take them along. I don’t get it. No masks. No cards. How’d this house miss getting hit? Last night was the worst in months!”

Tim struggled painfully to his feet. His mouth was bleeding. His vision blurred. He hung on tight to the wall. “Look,” he muttered. “For God’s sake —”

The captain was staring into the kitchen. “Is that — is that *food?*” He advanced slowly through the dining-room. “Look!”

The other soldiers came after him, Mary and the children forgotten. They stood around the table, amazed.

“Look at it!”

“Coffee.” One grabbed up the pot and drank it greedily down. He choked, black coffee dripping down his tunic. “Hot. Jeez. Hot coffee.”

“Cream!” Another soldier tore open the refrigerator. “Look. Milk. Eggs. Butter. Meat.” His voice broke. “It’s full of food.”

The captain disappeared into the pantry. He came out, lugging a case of canned peas. “Get the rest. Get it all. We’ll load it in the snake.”

He dropped the case on the table with a crash. Watching Tim intently, he fumbled in his dirty tunic until he found a cigarette.

He lit it slowly, not taking his eyes from Tim. “All right,” he said. “Let’s hear what you have to say.”

Tim’s mouth opened and closed. No words came. His mind was blank. Dead. He couldn’t think.

“This food. Where’d you get it? And these things.” The captain waved around the kitchen. “Dishes. Furniture. How come this house hasn’t been hit? How did you survive last night’s attack?”

“I —” Tim gasped.

The captain came toward him ominously. “The woman. And the kids. All of you. What are you doing here?” His voice was hard. “You better be able to explain, mister. You better be able to explain what you’re doing here — or we’ll have to burn the whole damn lot of you.”

Tim sat down at the table. He took a deep, shuddering breath, trying to focus his mind. His body ached. He rubbed blood from his mouth, conscious of a broken molar and bits of loose tooth. He got out a handkerchief and spat the bits into it. His hands were shaking.

“Come on,” the captain said.

Mary and the children slipped into the room. Judy was crying. Virginia's face was blank with shock. Earl stared wide-eyed at the soldiers, his face white.

"Tim," Mary said, putting her hand on his arm. "Are you all right?"

Tim nodded. "I'm all right."

Mary pulled her dress around her. "Tim, they can't get away with it. Somebody'll come. The mailman. The neighbors. They can't just —"

"Shut up," the captain snapped. His eyes flickered oddly. "The mailman? What are you talking about?" He held out his hand. "Let's see your yellow slip, sister."

"Yellow slip?" Mary faltered.

The captain rubbed his jaw. "No yellow slip. No masks. No cards."

"They're geeps," a soldier said.

"Maybe. And maybe not."

"They're geeps, Captain. We better burn 'em. We can't take any chances."

"There's something funny going on here," the captain said. He plucked at his neck, lifting up a small box on a cord. "I'm getting a polic here."

"A polic?" A shiver moved through the soldiers. "Wait, Captain. We can handle this. Don't get a polic. He'll put us on 4 and then we'll never —"

The captain spoke into the box. "Give me Web B."

Tim looked up at Mary. “Listen, honey. I —”

“Shut up.” A soldier prodded him. Tim lapsed into silence.

The box squawked. “Web B.”

“Can you spare a polic? We’ve run into something strange. Group of five. Man, woman, three kids. No masks, no cards, the woman not strung, dwelling completely intact. Furniture, fixtures, about two hundred pounds of food.”

The box hesitated. “All right. Polic on the way. Stay there. Don’t let them escape.”

“I won’t.” The captain dropped the box back in his shirt. “A polic will be here any minute. Meanwhile, let’s get the food loaded.”

From outside came a deep thundering roar. It shook the house, rattling the dishes in the cupboard.

“Jeez,” a soldier said. That was close.”

“I hope the screens hold until nightfall.” The captain grabbed up the case of canned peas. “Get the rest. We want it loaded before the polic comes.”

The two soldiers filled their arms and followed him through the house, out the front door. Their voices diminished as they strode down the path.

Tim got to his feet. “Stay here,” he said thickly.

“What are you doing?” Mary asked nervously.

“Maybe I can get out.” He ran to the back door and unlatched it, hands shaking. He pulled the door wide and stepped out on the back porch. “I don’t see any of them. If we can only…”

He stopped.

Around him gray clouds blew. Gray ash, billowing as far as he could see. Dim shapes were visible. Broken shapes, silent and unmoving in the grayness.

Ruins.

Ruined buildings. Heaps of rubble. Debris everywhere. He walked slowly down the back steps. The concrete walk ended abruptly. Beyond it, slag and heaps of rubble were strewn. Nothing else. Nothing as far as the eye could see.

Nothing stirred. Nothing moved. In the gray silence there was no life. No motion. Only the clouds of drifting ash. The slag and the endless heaps.

The city was gone. The buildings were destroyed. Nothing remained. No people. No life. Jagged walls, empty and gaping. A few dark weeds growing among the debris. Tim bent down, touching a weed. Rough, thick stalk. And the slag. It was a metal slag. Melted metal. He straightened up —

“Come back inside,” a crisp voice said.

He turned numbly. A man stood on the porch, behind him, hands on his hips. A small man, hollow-cheeked. Eyes small and bright, like two black coals. He wore a uniform different from the soldiers’. His mask was pushed back, away from his face. His skin was yellow, faintly luminous, clinging to his cheekbones. A sick face, ravaged by fever and fatigue.

“Who are you?” Tim said.

“Douglas. Political Commissioner Douglas.”

“You’re — you’re the police,” Tim said.

“That’s right. Now come inside. I expect to hear some answers from you. I have quite a few questions.”

“The first thing I want to know,” Commissioner Douglas said, “is how this house escaped destruction.”

Tim and Mary and the children sat together on the couch, silent and unmoving, faces blank with shock.

“Well?” Douglas demanded.

Tim found his voice. “Look,” he said. “I don’t know. I don’t know anything. We woke up this morning like every other morning. We dressed and ate breakfast —”

“It was foggy out,” Virginia said. “We looked out and saw the fog.”

“And the radio wouldn’t work,” Earl said.

“The radio?” Douglas’s thin face twisted. “There haven’t been any audio signals in months. Except for government purposes. This house. All of you. I don’t understand. If you were geeps —”

“Geeps. What does that mean?” Mary murmured.

“Soviet general-purpose troops.”

“Then the war has begun.”

“North America was attacked two years ago,” Douglas said. “In 1978.”

Tim sagged. “1978. Then this is 1980.” He reached suddenly into his pocket. He pulled out his wallet and tossed it to Douglas. “Look in there.”

Douglas opened the wallet suspiciously. “Why?”

“The library card. The parcel receipts. Look at the dates.” Tim turned to Mary. “I’m beginning to understand now. I had an idea when I saw the ruins.”

“Are we winning?” Earl piped.

Douglas studied Tim’s wallet intently. “Very interesting. These are all old. Seven and eight years.” His eyes flickered. “What are you trying to say? That you came from the past? That you’re time travelers?”

The captain came back inside. “The snake is all loaded, sir.”

Douglas nodded curtly. “All right. You can take off with your patrol.”

The captain glanced at Tim. “Will you be —”

“I’ll handle them.”

The captain saluted. “Fine, sir.” He quickly disappeared through the door. Outside, he and his men climbed aboard a long thin truck, like a pipe mounted on treads. With a faint hum the truck leaped forward.

In a moment only gray clouds and the dim outline of ruined buildings remained.

Douglas paced back and forth, examining the livingroom, the wallpaper, the light fixture and chairs. He picked up some magazines and thumbed through them. “From the past. But not far in the past.”

“Seven years?”

“Could it be? I suppose. A lot of things have happened in the last few months. Time travel.” Douglas grinned ironically. “You picked a bad spot, McLean. You should have gone farther on.”

“I didn’t pick it. It just happened.”

“You must have done *something.*”

Tim shook his head. “No. Nothing. We got up. And we were — here.”

Douglas was deep in thought. “Here. Seven years in the future. Moved forward through time. We know nothing about time travel. No work has been done with it. There seem to be evident military possibilities.”

“How did the war begin?” Mary asked faintly.

“Begin? It didn’t begin. You remember. There was war seven years ago.”

“The real war. This.”

“There wasn’t any point when it became — this. We fought in Korea. We fought in China. In Germany and Yugoslavia and Iran. It spread, farther and farther. Finally the bombs were falling here. It came like the plague. The war *grew.* It didn’t begin.” Abruptly he put his notebook away. “A report on you would be suspect. They might think that I had the ash sickness.”

“What’s that?” Virginia asked.

“Radioactive particles in the air. Carried to the brain. Causes insanity. Everybody has a touch of it, even with the masks.”

“I’d sure like to know who’s winning,” Earl repeated. “What was that outside? That truck. Was it rocket propelled?”

“The snake? No. Turbines. Boring snout. Cuts through the debris.”

“Seven years,” Mary said. “So much has changed. It doesn’t seem possible.”

“So much?” Douglas shrugged. “I suppose so. I remember what I was doing seven years ago. I was still in school. Learning. I had an apartment and a car. I went out dancing. I bought a TV set. But these things were there. The twilight. This. Only I didn’t know. None of us knew. But they were there.”

“You’re a Political Commissioner?” Tim asked.

“I supervise the troops. Watch for political deviation. In a total war we have to keep people under constant surveillance. One Commie down in the Webs could wreck the whole business. We can’t take chances.”

Tim nodded. “Yes. It was there. The twilight. Only we didn’t understand it.”

Douglas examined the books in the bookcase. “I’ll take a couple of these along. I haven’t seen fiction in months. Most of it disappeared. Burned back in ‘77.”

“Burned?”

Douglas helped himself. “Shakespeare. Milton. Dryden. I’ll take the old stuff. It’s safer. None of the Steinbeck and Dos Passos. Even a polic can get in trouble. If you stay here, you better get rid of *that*.” He tapped a volume of Dostoevski, *The Brothers Karamazov.*

“If we stay! What else can we do?”

“You want to stay?”

“No,” Mary said quietly.

Douglas shot her a quick glance. “No, I suppose not. If you stay you’ll be separated, of course. Children to the Canadian Relocation Centers. Women are situated down in the undersurface factory-labor camps. Men are automatically a part of Military.”

“Like those there who left,” Tim said.

“Unless you can qualify for the id block.”

“What’s that?”

“Industrial Designing and Technology. What training have you had? Anything along scientific lines?”

“No. Accounting.”

Douglas shrugged. “Well, you’ll be given a standard test. If your IQ is high enough you could go in the Political Service. We use a lot of men.” He paused thoughtfully, his arms loaded with books. “You better go back, McLean. You’ll have trouble getting accustomed to this. I’d go back, if I could. But I can’t.”

“Back?” Mary echoed. “How?”

“The way you came.”

“We just came.”

Douglas halted at the front door. “Last night was the worst rom attack so far. They hit this whole area.”

“Rom?”

“Robot operated missiles. The Soviets are systematically destroying continental America, mile by mile. Roms are cheap. They make them by the million and fire them off. The whole process is automatic. Robot factories turn them out and fire them at us. Last night they came over here — waves of them. This morning the patrol came in and found nothing. Except you, of course.”

Tim nodded slowly. “I’m beginning to see.”

“The concentrated energy must have tipped some unstable time fault. Like a rock fault. We’re always starting earthquakes. But a *time quake*… Interesting. That’s what happened, I think. The release of energy, the destruction of matter, sucked your house into the future. Carried the house seven years ahead. This street, everything here, this very spot, was pulverized. Your house, seven years back, was caught in the undertow. The blast must have lashed back through time.”

“Sucked into the future,” Tim said. “During the night. While we were asleep.”

Douglas watched him carefully. “Tonight,” he said, “there will be another rom attack. It should finish off what is left.” He looked at his watch. “It is now four in the afternoon. The attack will begin in a few hours. You should be undersurface. Nothing will survive up here. I can take you down with me, if you want. But if you want to take a chance, if you want to stay here —”

“You think it might tip us back?”

“Maybe. I don’t know. It’s a gamble. It might tip you back to your own time, or it might not. If not —”

“If not we wouldn’t have a chance of survival.”

Douglas flicked out a pocket map and spread it open on the couch. “A patrol will remain in this area another half-hour. If you decide to come undersurface with us, go down the street this way.” He traced a line on the map. “To this open field here. The patrol is a Political unit. They’ll take you the rest of the way down. You think you can find the field?”

“I think so,” Tim said, looking at the map. His lips twisted. “That open field used to be the grammar school my kids went to. That’s where they were going when the troops stopped them. Just a little while ago.”

“Seven years ago,” Douglas corrected. He snapped the map shut and restored it to his pocket. He pulled his mask down and moved out the front door onto the porch. “Maybe I’ll see you again. Maybe not. It’s your decision. You’ll have to decide one way or the other. In any case — good luck.”

He turned and walked briskly from the house.

“Dad,” Earl shouted, “are you going in the Army? Are you going to wear a mask and shoot one of those guns?” His eyes sparkled with excitement. “Are you going to drive a *snake?”*

Tim McLean squatted down and pulled his son to him. “You want that? *You want to stay here?* If I’m going to wear a mask and shoot one of those guns we can’t go back.”

Earl looked doubtful. “Couldn’t we go back later?”

Tim shook his head. “Afraid not. We’ve got to decide now, whether we’re going back or not.”

“You heard Mr Douglas,” Virginia said disgustedly. “The attack’s going to start in a couple hours.”

Tim got to his feet and paced back and forth. “If we stay in the house we’ll get blown to bits. Let’s face it. There’s only a faint chance we’ll be tipped back to our own time. A slim possibility — a long shot. Do we want to stay here with roms falling all around us, knowing any second it may be the end — hearing them come closer, hitting nearer — lying on the floor, waiting, listening —”

“Do you really want to go back?” Mary demanded.

“Of course, but the risk —”

“I’m not asking you about the risk. I’m asking you if you really want to go back. Maybe you want to stay here. Maybe Earl’s right. You in a uniform and a mask, with one of those needle guns. Driving a snake.”

“With you in a factory-labor camp! And the kids in a Government Relocation Center! How do you think that would be? What do you think they’d teach them? What do you think they’d grow up like? And believe…”

“They’d probably teach them to be very useful.”

“Useful! To what? To themselves? To mankind? Or to the war effort…?”

“They’d be alive,” Mary said. “They’d be safe. This way, if we stay in the house, wait for the attack to come —”

“Sure,” Tim grated. “They would be alive. Probably quite healthy. Well fed. Well clothed and cared for.” He looked down at his children, his face hard. “They’d stay alive, all right. They’d live to grow up and become adults. But what kind of adults? You heard what he said! Book burnings in

‘77. What’ll they be taught from? What kind of ideas are left, since ‘77? What kind of beliefs can they get from a Government Relocation Center? What kind of values will they have?”

“There’s the id block,” Mary suggested.

“Industrial Designing and Technology. For the bright ones. The clever ones with imagination. Busy slide rules and pencils. Drawing and planning and making discoveries. The girls could go into that. They could design the guns. Earl could go into the Political Service. He could make sure the guns were used. If any of the troops deviated, didn’t want to shoot, Earl could report them and have them hauled off for reeducation. To have their political faith strengthened — in a world where those *with* brains design weapons and those *without* brains fire them.”

“But they’d be alive,” Mary repeated.

“You’ve got a strange idea of what being alive is! You call that alive? Maybe it is.” Tim shook his head wearily. “Maybe you’re right. Maybe we should go undersurface with Douglas. Stay in this world. Stay alive.”

“I didn’t say that,” Mary said softly. “Tim, I had to find out if you *really* understood why it’s worth it. Worth staying in the house, taking the chance we won’t be tipped back.”

“Then you want to take the chance?”

“Of course! We *have* to. We can’t turn our children over to them — to the Relocation Center. To be taught how to hate and kill and destroy.” Mary smiled up wanly. “Anyhow, they’ve always gone to the Jefferson School. And here, in this world, it’s only an open field.”

“Are we going back?” Judy piped. She caught hold of Tim’s sleeve imploringly. “Are we going back now?”

Tim disengaged her arm. “Very soon, honey.”

Mary opened the supply cupboards and rooted in them. “Everything’s here. What did they take?”

“The case of canned peas. Everything we had in the refrigerator. And they smashed the front door.”

“I’ll bet we’re beating them!” Earl shouted. He ran to the window and peered out. The sight of the rolling ash disappointed him. “I can’t see anything! Just the fog!” He turned questioningly to Tim. “Is it always like this, here?”

“Yes,” Tim answered.

Earl’s face fell. “Just fog? Nothing else. Doesn’t the sun shine ever?”

“I’ll fix some coffee,” Mary said.

“Good.” Tim went into the bathroom and examined himself in the mirror. His mouth was cut, caked with dried blood. His head ached. He felt sick at his stomach.

“It doesn’t seem possible,” Mary said, as they sat down at the kitchen table.

Tim sipped his coffee. “No. It doesn’t.” Where he sat he could see out the window. The clouds of ash. The dim, jagged outline of ruined buildings.

“Is the man coming back?” Judy piped. “He was all thin and funny-looking. He isn’t coming back, is he?”

Tim looked at his watch. It read ten o’clock. He reset it, moving the hands to four-fifteen. “Douglas said it would begin at nightfall. That won’t be long.”

“Then we’re really staying in the house,” Mary said.

“That’s right.”

“Even though there’s only a little chance?”

“Even though there’s only a little chance we’ll get back. Are you glad?”

“I’m glad,” Mary said, her eyes bright. “It’s worth it, Tim. You know it is. Anything’s worth it, any chance. *To get back.* And something else. We’ll all be here together… We can’t be — broken up. Separated.”

Tim poured himself more coffee. “We might as well make ourselves comfortable. We have maybe three hours to wait. We might as well try to enjoy them.”

At six-thirty the first rom fell. They felt the shock, a deep rolling wave of force that lapped over the house.

Judy came running in from the dining-room, face white with fear. “Daddy! What is it?”

“Nothing. Don’t worry.”

“Come on back,” Virginia called impatiently. “It’s your turn.” They were playing Monopoly.

Earl leaped to his feet. “I want to see.” He ran excitedly to the window. “I can see where it hit!”

Tim lifted the shade and looked out. Far off, in the distance, a white glare burned fitfully. A towering column of luminous smoke rose from it.

A second shudder vibrated through the house. A dish crashed from the shelf, into the sink.

It was almost dark outside. Except for the two spots of white Tim could make out nothing. The clouds of ash were lost in the gloom. The ash and the ragged remains of buildings.

“That was closer,” Mary said.

A third rom fell. In the livingroom windows burst, showering glass across the rug.

“We better get back,” Tim said.

“Where?”

“Down in the basement. Come on.” Tim unlocked the basement door and they trooped nervously downstairs.

“Food,” Mary said. “We better bring the food that’s left.”

“Good idea. You kids go on down. We’ll come along in a minute.”

“I can carry something,” Earl said.

“Go on down.” The fourth rom hit, farther off than the last. “And stay away from the window.”

“I’ll move something over the window,” Earl said. “The big piece of plywood we used for my train.”

“Good idea.” Tim and Mary returned to the kitchen. “Food. Dishes. What else?”

“Books.” Mary looked nervously around. “I don’t know. Nothing else. Come on.”

A shattering roar drowned out her words. The kitchen window gave, showering glass over them. The dishes over the sink tumbled down in a torrent of breaking china. Tim grabbed Mary and pulled her down.

From the broken window rolling clouds of ominous gray drifted into the room. The evening air stank, a sour, rotten smell. Tim shuddered.

“Forget the food. Let’s get back down.”

“But —”

“Forget it.” He grabbed her and pulled her down the basement stairs. They tumbled in a heap, Tim slamming the door after them.

“Where’s the food?” Virginia demanded.

Tim wiped his forehead shakily. “Forget it. We won’t need it.”

“Help me,” Earl gasped. Tim helped him move the sheet of plywood over the window above the laundry tubs. The basement was cold and silent. The cement floor under them was faintly moist.

Two roms struck at once. Tim was hurled to the floor. The concrete hit him and he grunted. For a moment blackness swirled around him. Then he was on his knees, groping his way up.

“Everybody all right?” he muttered.

“I’m all right,” Mary said. Judy began to whimper. Earl was feeling his way across the room.

“I’m all right,” Virginia said. “I guess.”

The lights flickered and dimmed. Abruptly they went out. The basement was pitch-black.

“Well,” Tim said. “There they go.”

“I have my flashlight.” Earl winked the flashlight on. “How’s that?”

“Fine,” Tim said.

More roms hit. The ground leaped under them, bucking and heaving. A wave of force shuddering the whole house.

“We better lie down,” Mary said.

“Yes. Lie down.” Tim stretched himself out awkwardly. A few bits of plaster rained down around them.

“When will it stop?” Earl asked uneasily.

“Soon,” Tim said.

“Then we’ll be back?”

“Yes. We’ll be back.”

The next blast hit them almost at once. Tim felt the concrete rise under him. It grew, swelling higher and higher. He was going up. He shut his eyes, holding on tight. Higher and higher he went, carried up by the ballooning concrete. Around him beams and timbers cracked. Plaster poured down. He could hear glass breaking. And a long way off, the licking crackles of fire.

“Tim,” Mary’s voice came faintly.

“Yes.”

“We’re not going to — to make it.”

“I don’t know.”

“We’re not. I can tell.”

“Maybe not.” He grunted in pain as a board struck his back, settling over him. Boards and plaster, covering him, burying him. He could smell the sour smell, the night air and ash. It drifted and rolled into the cellar, through the broken window.

“Daddy,” Judy’s voice came faintly.

“What?”

“Aren’t we going back?”

He opened his mouth to answer. A shattering roar cut his words off. He jerked, tossed by the blast. Everything was moving around him. A vast wind tugged at him, a hot wind, licking at him, gnawing at him. He held on tight. The wind pulled, dragging him with it. He cried out as it seared his hands and face.

“Mary —”

Then silence. Only blackness and silence.

Cars.

Cars were stopping nearby. Then voices. And the noise of footsteps. Tim stirred, pushing the boards from him. He struggled to his feet.

“Mary.” He looked around. “We’re back.”

The basement was in ruins. The walls were broken and sagging. Great gaping holes showed a green line of grass beyond. A concrete walk. The small rose garden. The white stucco house next door.

Lines of telephone poles. Roofs. Houses. The city. As it had always been. Every morning.

“We’re back!” Wild joy leaped through him. *Back.* Safe. It was over. Tim pushed quickly through the debris of his ruined house. “Mary, are you all right?”

“Here.” Mary sat up, plaster dust raining from her. She was white all over, her hair, her skin, her clothing. Her face was cut and scratched. Her dress was torn. “Are we really back?”

“Mr McLean! You all right?”

A blue-clad policeman leaped down into the cellar. Behind him two white-clad figures jumped. A group of neighbors collected outside, peering anxiously to see.

“I’m okay,” Tim said. He helped Judy and Virginia up. “I think we’re all okay.”

“What happened?” The policeman pushed boards aside, coming over. “A bomb? Some kind of a bomb?”

“The house is a shambles,” one of the white-clad interns said. “You sure nobody’s hurt?”

“We were down here. In the basement.”

“You all right, Tim?” Mrs Hendricks called, stepping down gingerly into the cellar.

“What happened?” Frank Foley shouted. He leaped down with a crash. “God, Tim! What the hell were you doing?”

The two white-clad interns poked suspiciously around the ruins. “You’re lucky, mister. Damn lucky. There’s nothing left upstairs.”

Foley came over beside Tim. “Damn it man! I *told* you to have that hot water heater looked at!”

“What?” Tim muttered.

“The hot water heater! I told you there was something wrong with the cut-off. It must’ve kept heating up, not turned off…” Foley winked nervously. “But I won’t say anything, Tim. The insurance. You can count on me.”

Tim opened his mouth. But the words didn’t come. What could he say? — No, it wasn’t a defective hot water heater that I forgot to have repaired. No, it wasn’t a faulty connection in the stove. It wasn’t any of those things. It wasn’t a leaky gas line, it wasn’t a plugged furnace, it wasn’t a pressure cooker we forgot to turn off.

It’s war. Total war. And not just war for me. For my family. For my house.

It’s for your house, too. Your house and my house and all the houses. Here and in the next block, in the next town, the next state and country and continent. The whole world, like this. Shambles and ruins. Fog and dank weeds growing in the rusting slag. War for all of us. For everybody crowding down into the basement, white-faced, frightened, somehow sensing something terrible.

And when it really came, when the five years were up, there'd be no escape. No going back, tipping back into the past, away from it. When it came for them all, it would have them for eternity; there would be no one climbing back out, as he had.

Mary was watching him. The policeman, the neighbors, the white-clad interns — all of them were watching him. Waiting for him to explain. To tell them what it was.

"Was it the hot water heater?" Mrs Hendricks asked timidly. "That was it, wasn't it, Tim? Things like that do happen. You can't be sure…"

"Maybe it was home brew," a neighbor suggested, in a feeble attempt at humor. "Was that it?"

He couldn't tell them. They wouldn't understand, because they didn't want to understand. They didn't want to know. They needed reassurance. He could see it in their eyes. Pitiful, pathetic fear. They sensed something terrible — and they were afraid. They were searching his face, seeking his help. Words of comfort. Words to banish their fear.

"Yeah," Tim said heavily. "It was the hot water heater."

"I thought so!" Foley breathed. A sigh of relief swept through them all. Murmurs, shaky laughs. Nods, grins.

"I should have got it fixed," Tim went on. "I should have had it looked at a long time ago. Before it got in such bad shape." Tim looked around at the circle of anxious people, hanging on his words. "I should have had it looked at. Before it was too late."

A Present for Pat

“What is it?” Patricia Blake demanded eagerly.

“What’s what?” Eric Blake murmured.

“What did you bring? I *know* you brought me something!” Her bosom rose and fell excitedly under her mesh blouse. “You brought me a present. I can tell!”

“Honey, I went to Ganymede for Terran Metals, not to find you curios. Now let me unpack my things. Bradshaw says I have to report to the office early tomorrow. He says I better report some good ore deposits.”

Pat snatched up a small box, heaped with all the other luggage the robot porter had deposited at the door. “Is it jewelry? No, it’s too big for jewelry.” She began to tear the cord from the box with her sharp fingernails.

Eric frowned uneasily. “Don’t be disappointed, honey. It’s sort of strange. Not what you expect.” He watched apprehensively. “Don’t get mad at me. I’ll explain all about it.”

Pat’s mouth fell open. She turned pale. She dropped the box quickly on the table, eyes wide with horror. “Good Lord! What is it?”

Eric twisted nervously. “I got a good buy on it, honey. You can’t usually pick one of them up. The Ganymedeans don’t like to sell them, and I —”

“What is it?”

“It’s a god,” Eric muttered. “A minor Ganymedean deity. I got it practically at cost.”

Pat gazed down at the box with fear and growing disgust. That? That's a — a *god?"*

In the box was a small, motionless figure, perhaps ten inches high. It was old, terribly old. Its tiny clawlike hands were pressed against its scaly breast. Its insect face was twisted in a scowl of anger — mixed with cynical lust. Instead of legs it rested on a tangle of tentacles. The lower portion of its face dissolved in a complex beak, mandibles of some hard substance. There was an odor to it, as of manure and stale beer. It appeared to be bisexual.

Eric had thoughtfully put a little waterdish and some straw in the box. He had punched air holes in the lid and crumpled up newspaper fragments.

"You mean it's an idol." Pat regained her poise slowly. "An *idol* of a deity."

"No." Eric shook his head stubbornly. "This is a genuine deity. There's a warranty, or something."

"Is it — dead?"

"Not at all."

"Then why doesn't it move?"

"You have to arouse it." The bottom of the figure's belly cupped outward in a hollow bowl. Eric tapped the bowl. "Place an offering here and it comes to life. I'll show you."

Pat retreated. "No thanks."

"Come on! It's interesting to talk to. Its name is —" He glanced at some writing on the box. "Its name is Tinokuknoi Arevulopapo. We talked most

of the way back from Ganymede. It was glad of the opportunity. And I learned quite a few things about gods."

Eric searched his pockets and brought out the remains of a ham sandwich. He wadded up a bit of the ham and stuffed it into the protruding belly-cup of the god.

"I'm going in the other room," Pat said.

"Stick around." Eric caught her arm. "It only takes a second. It begins to digest right away."

The belly-cup quivered. The god's scaly flesh rippled. Presently the cup filled with a sluggish dark-colored substance. The ham began to dissolve.

Pat snorted in disgust. "Doesn't it even use its mouth?"

"Not for eating. Only for talking. It's a lot different from usual life-forms."

The tiny eye of the god was focused on them now. A single, unwinking orb of icy malevolence. The mandibles twitched.

"Greetings," the god said.

"Hi." Eric nudged Pat forward. "This is my wife. Mrs Blake. Patricia."

"How do you do," the god grated.

Pat gave a squeal of dismay. "It talks English."

The god turned to Eric in disgust. "You were right. She *is* stupid."

Eric colored. “Gods can do anything they want, honey. They’re omnipotent.”

The god nodded. “That is so. This is Terra, I presume.”

“Yes. How does it look?”

“As I expected. I have already heard reports. Certain reports about Terra.”

“Eric, are you sure it’s safe?” Pat whispered uneasily. “I don’t like its looks. And there’s something about the way it talks.” Her bosom quivered nervously.

“Don’t worry, honey,” Eric said carelessly. “It’s a nice god. I checked before I left Ganymede.”

“I’m benevolent,” the god explained matter-of-factly. “My capacity has been that of Weather Deity to the Ganymedean aborigines. I have produced rain and allied phenomena when the occasion demanded.”

“But that’s all in the past,” Eric added.

“Correct. I have been a Weather Deity for ten thousand years. There is a limit to even a god’s patience. I craved new surroundings.” A peculiar gleam flickered across the loathsome face. “That is why I arranged to be sold and brought to Terra.”

“You see,” Eric said, “the Ganymedeans didn’t want to sell it. But it whipped up a thunderstorm and they sort of had to. That’s partly why it was so cheap.”

“Your husband made a good purchase,” the god said. Its single eye roved around curiously. “This is your dwelling? You eat and sleep here?”

That’s right,” Eric said. “Pat and I both —”

The front door chimed. “Thomas Matson stands on the threshold,” the door stated. “He wishes admission.”

“Golly,” Eric said. “Good old Tom. I’ll go let him in.”

Pat indicated the god. “Hadn’t you better —”

“Oh, no. I want Tom to see it.” Eric stepped to the door and opened it.

“Hello,” Tom said, striding in. “Hi, Pat. Nice day.” He and Eric shook hands. “The Lab has been wondering when you’d get back. Old Bradshaw is leaping up and down to hear your report.” Matson’s beanpole body bent forward in sudden interest. “Say, what’s in the box?”

“That’s my god,” Eric said modestly.

“Really? But God is an unscientific concept.”

“This is a different god. I didn’t invent it. I bought it. On Ganymede. It’s a Ganymedean Weather Deity.”

“Say something,” Pat said to the god. “So he’ll believe your owner.”

“Let’s debate my existence,” the god said sneeringly. “You take the negative. Agreed?”

Matson grinned. “What is this, Eric? A little robot? Sort of hideous looking.”

“Honest. It’s a god. On the way it did a couple of miracles for me. Not big miracles, of course, but enough to convince me.”

“Hearsay,” Matson said. But he was interested. “Pass a miracle, god. I’m all ears.”

“I am not a vulgar showpiece,” the god growled.

“Don’t get it angry,” Eric cautioned. “There’s no limit to its powers, once aroused.”

“How does a god come into being?” Tom asked. “Does a god create itself? If it’s dependent on something prior then there must be a more ultimate order of being which —”

“Gods,” the tiny figure stated, “are inhabitants of a higher level, a greater plane of reality. A more advanced dimension. There are a number of planes of existence. Dimensional continuums, arranged in a hierarchy. Mine is one above yours.”

“What are you doing here?”

“Occasionally beings pass from one dimensional continuum to another. When they pass from a superior continuum to an inferior — as I have done — they are worshipped as gods.”

Tom was disappointed. “You’re not a god at all. You’re just a life-form of a slightly different dimensional order that’s changed phase and entered our vector.”

The little figure glowered. “You make it sound simple. Actually, such a transformation requires great cunning and is seldom done. I came here because a member of my race, a certain malodorous Nar Dolk, committed a heinous crime and escaped into this continuum. Our law obliged me to follow in hot pursuit. In the process this flotsam, this spawn of dampness, escaped and assumed some disguise or other. I continually search, but he has not yet been apprehended.” The small god broke off suddenly. “Your curiosity is idle. It annoys me.”

Tom turned his back on the god. “Pretty weak stuff. We do more down at the Terran Metals Lab than this character ever —”

The air crackled, ozone flashing. Tom Matson shrieked. Invisible hands lifted him bodily and propelled him to the door. The door swung open and Matson sailed down the walk, tumbling in a heap among the rose bushes, arms and legs flailing wildly.

“Help!” Matson yelled, struggling to get up.

“Oh, dear,” Pat gasped.

“Golly.” Eric shot a glance at the tiny figure. “You did that?”

“Help him,” Pat urged, white-faced. “I think he’s hurt. He looks funny.”

Eric hurried outside and helped Matson to his feet. “You okay? It’s your own fault. I told you if you kept annoying it something might happen.”

Matson’s face was ablaze with rage. “No little pipsqueak god is going to treat me like this!” He pushed Eric aside, heading back for the house. “I’ll take it down to the Lab and pop it in a bottle of formaldehyde. I’ll dissect it and skin it and hang it up on the wall. I’ll have the first specimen of a god known to —”

A ball of light glowed around Matson. The ball enveloped him, settling in place around his lean body so that he looked like a filament in an incandescent light.

“What the hell!” Matson muttered. Suddenly he jerked. His body faded. He began to shrink. With a faint whoosh he diminished rapidly. Smaller and smaller he dwindled. His body shuddered, altering strangely.

The light winked out. Sitting stupidly on the walk was a small green toad.

“See?” Eric said wildly. “I told you to keep quiet! Now look what it’s done!”

The toad hopped feebly toward the house. At the porch it sagged into immobility, defeated by the steps. It uttered a pathetic, hopeless *chug.*

Pat’s voice rose in a wail of anguish. “Oh, Eric! Look what it’s done! Poor Tom!”

“His own fault,” Eric said. “He deserves it.” But he was beginning to get nervous. “Look here,” he said to the god. “That’s not a very nice thing to do to a grown man. What’ll his wife and kids think?”

“What’ll Mr Bradshaw think?” Pat cried. “He can’t go to work like that!”

“True,” Eric admitted. He appealed to the god. “I think he’s learned his lesson. How about turning him back? Okay?”

“You just better undo him!” Pat shrieked, clenching her small fists. “If you don’t undo him you’ll have Terran Metals after you. Even a god can’t stand up to Horace Bradshaw.”

“Better change him back,” Eric said.

“It’ll do him good,” the god said. “I’ll leave him that way for a couple of centuries —”

“Centuries!” Pat exploded. “Why, you little blob of slime!” She advanced ominously toward the box, shaking with wrath. “See here! You turn him back or I’ll take you out of your box and drop you into the garbage disposal unit!”

“Make her be still,” the god said to Eric.

“Calm down, Pat,” Eric implored.

“I will not calm down! Who does it think it is? A present! How *dare* you bring this moldy bit of refuse into our house? Is this your idea of a —”

Her voice ceased abruptly.

Eric turned apprehensively. Pat stood rigid, her mouth open, a word still on her lips. She did not move. She was white all over. A solid gray-white that made cold chills leap up Eric’s spine. “Good Lord,” he said.

“I turned her to stone,” the god explained. “She made too much noise.” It yawned. “Now, I think I’ll retire. I’m a little tired, after my trip.”

“I can’t believe it,” Eric Blake said. He shook his head numbly. “My best friend a toad. My wife turned to stone.”

“It’s true,” the god said. “We deal out justice according to how people act. They both got what they deserved.”

“Can — can she hear me?”

“I suppose.”

Eric went over to the statue. “Pat,” he begged imploringly. “Please don’t be mad. It isn’t my fault.” He gripped her ice-cold shoulders. “Don’t blame me! I didn’t do it.” The granite was hard and smooth under his fingers. Pat stared blankly ahead.

“Terran Metals indeed,” the god grumbled sourly. Its single eye studied Eric intently. “Who is this Horace Bradshaw? Some local deity, perhaps?”

“Horace Bradshaw owns Terran Metals,” Eric said gloomily. He sat down and shakily lit a cigarette. “He’s about the biggest man on Terra. Terran Metals owns half the planets in the system.”

“Kingdoms of this world do not interest me,” the god said noncommittally, subsiding and shutting its eye. “I will retire now. I wish to contemplate certain matters. You may wake me later, if you wish. We can converse on theological subjects, as we did on the ship coming here.”

“Theological subjects,” Eric said bitterly. “My wife a stone block and it wants to talk about religion.”

But the god was already withdrawn, retired into itself.

“A lot you care,” Eric muttered. Anger flickered in him. “This is the thanks I get for taking you off Ganymede. Ruin my household and my social life. Fine god you are!”

No response.

Eric concentrated desperately. Maybe when the god awoke it would be in a better mood. Maybe he could persuade it to turn Matson and Pat back to their usual forms. Faint hope stirred. He could appeal to the god’s better side. After it had rested and slept for a few hours…

If nobody came looking for Matson.

The toad sat disconsolately on the walk, drooping with misery. Eric leaned toward it. “Hey, Matson!”

The toad looked slowly up.

“Don’t worry, old man. I’ll get it to turn you back. It’s a cinch.” The toad didn’t stir. “A lead-pipe cinch,” Eric repeated nervously.

The toad drooped a little more. Eric looked at his watch. It was late afternoon, almost four. Tom's shift at Terran began in half an hour. Sweat came out on his forehead. If the god went on sleeping and didn't wake up in half an hour —

A buzz. The vidphone.

Eric's heart sank. He hurried over and clicked the screen on, steeling himself. Horace Bradshaw's sharp, dignified features faded into focus. His keen glance bored into Eric, penetrating his depths.

"Blake," he grunted. "Back from Ganymede, I see."

"Yes, sir." Eric's mind raced frantically. He moved in front of the screen, cutting off Bradshaw's view of the room. "I'm just starting to unpack."

"Forget that and get over here! We're waiting to hear your report."

"Right now? Gosh, Mr Bradshaw. Give me a chance to get my things away." He fought desperately for time. "I'll be over tomorrow morning bright and early."

"Is Matson there with you?"

Eric swallowed. "Yes, sir. But —"

"Put him on. I want to talk to him."

"He — he can't talk to you right now, sir."

"What? Why not?"

"He's in no shape to — that is, he —"

Bradshaw snarled impatiently. “Then bring him along with you. And he better be sober when he gets here. I’ll see you at my office in ten minutes.” He broke the circuit. The screen faded abruptly.

Eric sank wearily down in a chair. His mind reeled. Ten minutes! He shook his head, stunned.

The toad hopped a little, stirring on the walk. It emitted a faint, despondent sound.

Eric got heavily to his feet. “I guess we have to face the music,” he murmured. He bent down and picked up the toad, putting it gingerly in his coat pocket. “I guess you heard. That was Bradshaw. We’re going down to the lab.”

The toad stirred uneasily.

“I wonder what Bradshaw is going to say when he sees you.” Eric kissed his wife’s cold granite cheek. “Goodbye, honey.”

He moved numbly down the walk to the street. A moment later he hailed a robot cab and entered it. “I have a feeling this is going to be hard to explain.” The cab zipped off down the street. “Hard as hell to explain.”

Horace Bradshaw stared in dumbfounded amazement. He removed his steel-rimmed glasses and wiped them slowly. He fitted them back on his hard, hawklike face and peered down. The toad rested silently in the center of the immense mahogany desk.

Bradshaw pointed shakily at the toad. “This — this is Thomas Matson?”

“Yes, sir,” Eric said.

Bradshaw blinked in wonder. “Matson! What in the world has happened to you?”

“He’s a toad,” Eric explained.

“So I see. Incredible.” Bradshaw pressed a stud on his desk. “Send in Jennings from the Biology Lab,” he ordered. “A toad.” He poked the toad with his pencil. “Is that really you, Matson?”

The toad *chugged.*

“Good Lord.” Bradshaw sat back, wiping his forehead. His grim expression faded into sympathetic concern. He shook his head sadly. “I can’t believe it. Some kind of bacterial blight, I suppose. Matson was always experimenting on himself. He took his work seriously. A brave man. A good worker. He did much for Terran Metals. Too bad he had to end this way. We’ll extend full pension to him, of course.”

Jennings entered the office. “You wanted me, sir?”

“Come in.” Bradshaw beckoned him impatiently in. “We have a problem for your department. You know Eric Blake here.”

“Hi, Blake.”

“And Thomas Matson.” Bradshaw indicated the toad. “From the Nonferrous Lab.”

“I know Matson,” Jennings said slowly. “That is, I know a Matson from Nonferrous. But I don’t recall — that is, he was taller than this. Almost six feet.”

“This is him,” Eric said gloomily. “He’s a toad now.”

“What happened?” Jennings’s scientific curiosity was aroused. “What’s the lowdown?”

“It’s a long story,” Eric said evasively.

“Can’t you tell it?” Jennings scrutinized the toad professionally. “Looks like a regular type of toad. You’re sure this is Tom Matson? Come clean, Blake. You must know more than you’re telling!”

Bradshaw studied Eric intently. “Yes, what *did* happen, Blake? You have a strange, shifty look. Are you responsible for this?” Bradshaw half rose from his chair, his grim face bleak. “See here. If it’s your fault one of my best men has been incapacitated for further work —”

“Take it easy,” Eric protested, his mind racing frantically. He patted the toad nervously. “Matson is perfectly safe — as long as nobody steps on him. We can rig up some sort of protective shield and an automatic communication system that’ll enable him to spell out words. He can continue his work. With a few adjustments here and there everything should speed along perfectly.”

“Answer me!” Bradshaw roared. “Are you responsible for this? Is this *your* doing?”

Eric squirmed helplessly. “In a way, I suppose. Not exactly. Not *directly.”* His voice wavered. “But I guess you’d say if it hadn’t been for me…”

Bradshaw’s face set in a rigid mask of rage. “Blake, you’re fired.” He yanked a heap of forms from his desk dispenser. “Get out of here and never come back. And get your hand off that toad. It belongs to Terran Metals.” He shoved a paper across the desk. “Here’s your paycheck. And don’t bother looking for work elsewhere. I’m listing you on the intersystem blacklist. Good day.”

“But, Mr Bradshaw —”

“Don’t plead.” Bradshaw waved his hand. “Just go. Jennings, get your biology staff busy at once. This problem must be licked. I want you to rearrange this toad back to its original shape. Matson is a vital part of Terran Metals. There’s work to be done, work only Matson can do. We can’t have this sort of thing holding up our research.”

“Mr Bradshaw,” Eric begged desperately. “Please listen. I want to see Tom back as he was. But there’s only one way we can get him back his original shape. We —”

Bradshaw’s eyes were cold with hostility. “You still here, Blake? Must I call my guards and have you dismembered? I’m giving you one minute to be off Company land. Understand?”

Eric nodded miserably. “I understand.” He turned and shuffled unhappily toward the door. “So long, Jennings. So long, Tom. I’ll be home if you want me, Mr Bradshaw.”

“Sorcerer,” Bradshaw snapped. “Good riddance.”

“What would you do,” Eric asked the robot cabdriver, “if your wife had turned to stone, your best friend were a toad, and you had lost your job?”

“Robots have no wives,” the driver said. “They are nonsexual. Robots have no friends, either. They are incapable of emotional relationships.”

“Can robots be fired?”

“Sometimes.” The robot drew his cab up before Eric’s modest six-room bungalow. “But consider. Robots are frequently melted down and new robots made from the remains. Recall Ibsen’s *Peer Gynt*, the section concerning the Button Molder. The lines clearly anticipate in symbolic form the trauma of robots to come.”

“Yeah.” The door opened and Eric got out. “I guess we all have our problems.”

“Robots have worse problems than anybody.” The door shut and the cab zipped off, back down the hill.

Worse? Hardly. Eric entered his home slowly, the front door automatically opening for him.

“Welcome, Mr Blake,” the door greeted him.

“I suppose Pat’s still here.”

“Mrs Blake is here, but she is in a cataleptic state, or some similar condition.”

“She’s been turned to stone.” Eric kissed the cold lips of the statue gloomily. “Hi, honey.”

He got some meat from the refrigerator and crumbled it into the belly-cup of the god. Presently digestive fluid rose and covered the food. In a short time the single eye of the god opened, blinked a few times, and focused on Eric.

“Have a good sleep?” Eric inquired icily.

“I wasn’t asleep. My mind was turned toward matters of cosmic import. I detect a hostile quality in your voice. Has something unfavorable occurred?”

“Nothing. Nothing at all. I just lost my job, on top of everything else.”

“Lost your job? Interesting. What else do you refer to?”

Eric exploded in rage. “You’ve messed up my whole life, damn you!” He jabbed at the silent, unmoving figure of his wife. “Look! My wife! Turned to granite. And my best friend, a toad!”

Tinokuknoi Arevulopapo yawned. “So?”

“Why? What did I ever do to you? Why do you treat me this way? Look at all I’ve done for you. I only brought you here to Terra. Fed you. Fixed you up a box with straw and water and newspapers. That’s all.”

“True. You did bring me to Terra.” Again an odd gleam flickered across the god’s dark face. “All right. I’ll restore your wife.”

“You will?” Pathetic joy surged through Eric. Tears came to his eyes. He was too relieved to ask any questions. “Gosh, I sure would appreciate it!”

The god concentrated. “Stand out of the way. It’s easier to distort the molecular arrangement of a body than to restore the original configuration. I hope I can get it exactly as it was.” It made a faint motion.

Around Pat’s silent figure the air stirred. The pale granite shuddered. Slowly, color seeped back into her features. She gasped sharply, her dark eyes flashing with fear. Color filled her arms, shoulders, breasts, spreading through her trim body. She cried out, tottering unsteadily. *“Eric!”*

Eric caught her, hugging her tight. “Gosh, honey. I’m sure glad you’re all right.” He crushed her against him, feeling her heart thump with terror. He kissed her soft lips again and again. “Welcome back.”

Pat pulled abruptly away. “That little snake. That miserable particle of waste. Wait until I get my hands on it.” She advanced toward the god, eyes blazing. “Listen, you. What’s the idea? How *dare* you!”

“See?” the god said. “They never change.”

Eric pulled his wife back. “You better shut up or you’ll be granite again. Understand?”

Pat caught the urgent rasp in his voice. She subsided reluctantly. “All right, Eric, I give up.”

“Listen,” Eric said to the god. “How about Tom? How about restoring him?”

“The toad? Where is he?”

“In the Biology Lab. Jennings and his staff are working on him.”

The god considered. “I don’t like the sound of that. The Biology Lab? Where is that? How far away?”

“Terran Metals. Main Building.” Eric was impatient. “Maybe five miles. “How about it? Maybe if you restore him Bradshaw will give me my job back. You owe it to me. Set things back the way they were.”

“I can’t.”

“You *can’t*! Why the hell not?”

“I thought gods were omnipotent,” Pat sniffed petulantly.

“I can do anything — at short range. The Terran Metals Biology Lab is too far. Five miles is beyond my limit. I can distort molecular arrangements within a limited circle only.”

Eric was incredulous. “What? You mean you can’t turn Tom back?”

“That’s the way it is. You shouldn’t have taken him out of the house. Gods are subject to natural law just as you are. Our laws are different, but

they are still laws.”

“I see,” Eric murmured. “You should have said.”

“As far as your job goes, don’t worry about that. Here, I’ll create some gold.” The god made a motion with its scaly hands. A section of curtain flashed suddenly yellow and crashed to the floor with a metallic tinkle. “Solid gold. That ought to keep you a few days.”

“We’re no longer on the gold standard.”

“Well, whatever you need. I can do anything.”

“Except turn Tom back into a human being,” Pat said. “Fine god you are.”

“Shut up, Pat,” Eric muttered, deep in thought.

“If there was some way I could be closer to him,” the god said cautiously. “If he were within range…”

“Bradshaw will never let him go. And I can’t set foot around there. The guards will tear me to bits.”

“How about some platinum?” The god made a pass and a section of the wall glowed white. “Solid platinum. A simple change of atomic weight. Will that help?”

“No!” Eric paced back and forth. “We’ve got to get that toad away from Bradshaw. If we can get him back here —”

“I have an idea,” the god said.

“What?”

“Perhaps you could get me in there. Perhaps if I could get onto the Company grounds, within range of the Biology Lab.”

“It’s worth a try,” Pat said, putting her hand on Eric’s shoulder. “After all, Tom’s your best friend. It’s a shame to treat him this way. It’s — it’s unTerran.”

Eric grabbed his coat. “It’s settled. I’ll drive as close as I can to the Company grounds. I ought to be able to get near enough before the guards catch sight of me to —”

A crash. The front door collapsed abruptly in a heap of ash. Teams of robot police surged into the room, blastguns ready.

“All right,” Jennings said. “That’s him.” He strode quickly into the house. “Get him. And get that thing in the box.”

“Jennings!” Eric swallowed in alarm. “What the hell is this?”

Jennings’s lip curled. “Cut out the pretense, Blake. You’re not fooling me.” He tapped a small metal case under his arm. “The toad revealed all. So you’ve got a non-Terrestrial in this house, have you?” He laughed coldly. “There’s a law against bringing non-Terrans to Earth. You’re under arrest, Blake. You’ll probably get life.”

“Tinokuknoi Arevulopapo!” Eric Blake squeaked. “Don’t forsake me at a time like this!”

“I’m coming,” the god grunted. It heaved violently. “How’s this?”

The robot police jerked as a torrent of force erupted from the box. Abruptly they disappeared, winking out of existence. Where they had stood a horde of mechanical mice milled aimlessly, spilling frantically through the doorway, out into the yard.

Jennings's face showed astonishment and then panic. He retreated, waving his blaster menacingly. "See here, Blake. Don't think you can scare me. We've got this house surrounded."

A bolt of force hit him in the stomach. The bolt lifted him and shook him like a rag doll. His blaster skidded from his fingers, falling to the floor. Jennings groped for it desperately. The blaster turned into a spider and crawled rapidly off, out of his reach.

"Set him down," Eric urged.

"All right." The god released Jennings. He crashed to the floor, stunned and frightened. He scrambled wildly to his feet and ran from the house, down the path to the sidewalk.

"Oh dear," Pat said.

"What is it?"

"Look."

Pulled up in a circle around the house was a solid line of atomic cannon. Their snouts gleamed wickedly in the late afternoon sunlight. Groups of robot police stood around each cannon, waiting alertly for instructions.

Eric groaned. "We're sunk. One blast and we're finished."

"Do something!" Pat gasped. She prodded the box. "Enchant them. Don't just sit there."

"They are out of range," the god replied. "As I explained, my power is limited by distance."

“You in there!” a voice came, magnified by a hundred loudspeakers. “Come out with your hands up. Or we open fire!”

“Bradshaw,” Eric groaned. “He’s out there. We’re trapped. You sure you can’t do something?”

“Sorry,” the god said. “I can put up a shield against the cannon.” It concentrated. Outside the house a dull surface formed, a globe rapidly hardening around them.

“All right,” Bradshaw’s magnified voice came, muffled by the shield. “You asked for it.”

The first shell hit. Eric found himself lying on the floor, his ears ringing, everything going around and around. Pat lay beside him, dazed and frightened. The house was a shambles. Walls, chairs, furniture, all was in ruins.

“Fine shield,” Pat gasped.

“The concussion,” the god protested. Its box lay in the corner on its side. “The shield stops the shells, but the concussion —”

A second shell struck. A wall of pressure rolled over Eric, stunning him. He skidded, tossed by a violent wind, crashing against heaps of debris that had been his house.

“We can’t last,” Pat said faintly. “Tell them to stop, Eric. Please!”

“Your wife is right,” the god’s calm voice came up, from its overturned box. “Surrender, Eric. Give yourself up.”

“I guess I better.” Eric pulled himself up on his knees. “But golly, I don’t want to spend the rest of my life in prison. I knew I was breaking the law when I smuggled the damn thing in here, but I never thought —”

A third shell hit. Eric tumbled down, his chin smacking the floor. Plaster and rubble rained down on him, choking and blinding him. He fought his way up, grabbing hold of a jutting beam.

“Stop!” he shouted.

There was sudden silence.

“Are you willing to surrender?” the magnified voice boomed.

“Surrender,” the god murmured.

Eric’s mind raced desperately. “I — I have a deal. A compromise.” He thought fast, his brain in high gear. “I have a proposal.”

There was a long pause. “What’s the proposal?”

Eric stepped warily through the rubble to the edge of the shield. The shield was almost gone. Only a shimmering haze remained, through which the circle of atomic cannon was visible, the cannon and the robot police.

“Matson,” Eric gasped, getting his breath. “The toad. We’ll make the following deal. We’ll restore Matson to his original shape. We’ll return the non-Terrestrial to Ganymede. In return, you waive prosecution and I get my job back.”

“Absurd! My labs can easily restore Matson without your help.”

“Oh yeah? Ask Matson. He’ll tell you. If you don’t agree, Matson will be a toad for the next two hundred years — at least!”

A long silence followed. Eric could see figures moving back and forth, conferring behind the guns.

“All right,” Bradshaw’s voice came at last. “We agree. Drop the shield and come forward. I’ll send Jennings with the toad. No tricks, Blake!”

“No tricks.” Eric sagged with relief. “Come along,” he said to the god, picking up the dented box. “Drop the shield and let’s get this over with. Those cannon make me nervous.”

The god relaxed. The shield — what was left of it — wavered and faded, blinking off.

“Here I come.” Eric advanced warily, the box in his hands. “Where’s Matson?”

Jennings came toward him. “I have him.” His curiosity overcame his suspicion. “This ought to be interesting. We should make a close study of all extra-dimensional life. Apparently they possess science much in advance of our own.”

Jennings squatted down, placing the small green toad carefully on the grass.

“There he is,” Eric said to the god.

“Is this close enough?” Pat asked icily.

“This is sufficient,” the god said. “This is exactly right.” It turned its single eye on the toad and made a few brief motions with its scaly claws.

A shimmer hovered over the toad. Extra-dimensional forces were at work, fingering and plucking at the toad molecules. Abruptly the toad twitched. For a second it shuddered, an insistent vibration lapped over it. Then —

Matson ballooned into existence, the familiar beanpole figure, towering over Eric and Jennings and Pat.

“Lord,” Matson breathed shakily. He got out his handkerchief and wiped his face. “I’m glad that’s over. Wouldn’t want to go through that again.”

Jennings retreated hurriedly toward the circle of cannon. Matson turned and headed after him. Eric and his wife and god were suddenly alone in the center of the lawn.

“Hey!” Eric demanded, cold alarm plucking at him. “What is this? What the hell’s going on?”

“Sorry, Blake,” Bradshaw’s voice came. “It was essential to restore Matson. But we can’t alter the law. The law is above any man, even me. You’re under arrest.”

Robot police swarmed forward, grimly surrounding Eric and Pat. “You skunk,” Eric choked, struggling feebly.

Bradshaw came out from behind the cannon, hands in his pockets, grinning calmly. “Sorry, Blake. You should be out of jail in ten or fifteen years, though. Your job will be waiting for you — I promise. As for this extra-dimensional being, I’m quite interested in seeing it. I’ve heard of such things.” He peered toward the box. “I’m happy to take charge of it. Our labs will perform experiments and tests on it which will…”

Bradshaw’s words died. His face turned a sickly hue. His mouth opened and closed, but no sounds came.

From the box came a swelling, frenzied buzz of rage. *Nar Dolk!* I knew I’d find you!”

Bradshaw retreated, trembling violently. “Why, of all persons. Tinokuknoi Arevulopapo! What are you doing on Terra?” He stumbled, half falling. “How did you, that is, after so long, how could —”

Then Bradshaw was running, scattering robot police in all directions, rushing wildly past the atomic cannon.

“Nar Dolk!” the god screamed, swelling with fury. “Scourge of the Seven Temples! Flotsam of Space! I knew you were on this miserable planet! Come back and take your punishment!”

The god burst upward, flashing into the air. It raced past Eric and Pat, growing as it flew. A sickening, nauseous wind, warm and damp, lapped at their faces, as the god gained speed.

Bradshaw — Nar Dolk — ran frantically. And as he ran he *changed.* Immense wings sprouted from him. Great leathery wings, beating the air in frantic haste. His body oozed and altered. Tentacles replaced his legs. Scaly claws replaced arms. Gray hide rippled as he flew up, wings flapping noisily.

Tinokuknoi Arevulopapo struck. For a brief moment the two locked together, twisting and rolling in the air, wings and claws raking and flapping.

Then Nar Dolk broke away, fluttering up. A blazing flash, a pop, and he was gone.

For a moment Tinokuknoi Arevulopapo hovered in the air. The scaly head turned, the single eye glancing back and down at Eric and Pat. It nodded briefly. Then, with a curious shimmy, it vanished.

The sky was empty except for a few feathers and the dull stench of burning scales.

Eric was the first to speak. “Well,” he said. “So that’s why it wanted to come to Terra. I guess I was sort of exploited.” He grinned sheepishly. “The first Terran ever to be exploited.”

Matson gawked, still peering up. “They’re gone. Both of them. Back to their own dimension, I guess.”

A robot policeman plucked at Jennings’s sleeve. “Shall we arrest anyone, sir? With Mr Bradshaw gone you are next in charge.”

Jennings glanced at Eric and Pat. “I suppose not. The evidence has departed. It seems somewhat silly, anyhow.” He shook his head. “Bradshaw. Imagine! And we worked for him for years. Damn strange business.”

Eric put his arm around his wife. He pulled her against him, hugging her tight. “I’m sorry, honey,” he said softly.

“Sorry?”

“Your present. It’s gone. I guess I’ll have to get you something else.”

Pat laughed, pressing against him. “That’s all right. I’ll let you in on a secret.”

“What?”

Pat kissed him, her lips warm against his cheek. “As a matter of fact — I’m just as glad.”

The Hood Maker

“A hood!”

“Somebody with a hood!”

Workers and shoppers hurried down the sidewalk, joining the forming crowd. A sallow-faced youth dropped his bike and raced over. The crowd grew, businessmen in gray coats, tired-faced secretaries, clerks and workmen.

“Get him!” the crowd swarmed forward. “The old man!”

The sallow-faced youth scooped up a rock from the gutter and hurled it. The rock missed the old man, crashing against a store front.

“He’s got a hood, all right!”

“Take it away!”

More rocks fell. The old man gasped in fear, trying to push past two soldiers blocking his way. A rock struck him on the back.

“What you got to hide?” The sallow-faced youth ran up in front of him. “Why you afraid of a probe?”

“He’s got something to hide!” A worker grabbed the old man’s hat. Eager hands groped for the thin metal band around his head.

“Nobody’s got a right to hide!”

The old man fell, sprawling to his hands and knees, umbrella rolling. A clerk caught hold of the hood and tugged. The crowd surged, struggling to

get to the metal band. Suddenly the youth gave a cry. He backed off, the hood held up. “I got it! I got it!” He ran to his bike and pedaled off rapidly, gripping the bent hood.

A robot police car pulled up to the curb, siren screaming. Robot cops leaped out, clearing the mob away.

“You hurt?” They helped the old man up.

The old man shook his head, dazed. His glasses hung from one ear. Blood and saliva streaked his face.

“All right.” The cop’s metal fingers released. “Better get off the street. Inside someplace. For your own good.”

Clearance Director Ross pushed the memo plate away. “Another one. I’ll be glad when the Anti-Immunity Bill is passed.”

Peters glanced up. “Another?”

“Another person wearing a hood — a probe shield. That makes ten in the last forty-eight hours. They’re mailing more out all the time.”

“Mailed, slipped under doors, in pockets, left at desks — countless ways of distribution.”

“If more of them notified us —”

Peters grinned crookedly. “It’s a wonder any of them do. There’s a reason why hoods are sent to these people. They’re not picked out at random.”

“Why are they picked?”

“They have something to hide. Why else would hoods be sent to them?”

“What about those who *do* notify us?”

“They’re afraid to wear them. They pass the hoods on to us — to avoid suspicion.”

Ross reflected moodily. “I suppose so.”

“An innocent man has no reason to conceal his thoughts. Ninety-nine per cent of the population is glad to have its mind scanned. Most people *want* to prove their loyalty. But this one per cent is guilty of something.”

Ross opened a manila folder and took out a bent metal band. He studied it intently. “Look at it. Just a strip of some alloy. But it effectively cuts off all probes. The teeps go crazy. It buzzes them when they try to get past. Like a shock.”

“You’ve sent samples to the lab, of course.”

“No. I don’t want any of the lab workers turning out their own hoods. We have trouble enough!”

“Who was this taken from?”

Ross stabbed a button on his desk. “We’ll find out. I’ll have the teep make a report.”

The door melted and a lank sallow-faced youth came into the room. He saw the metal band in Ross’s hand and smiled, a thin, alert smile. “You wanted me?”

Ross studied the youth. Blond hair, blue eyes. An ordinary-looking kid, maybe a college sophomore. But Ross knew better. Ernest Abbud was a

telepathic mutant — a teep. One of several hundred employed by Clearance for its loyalty probes.

Before the teeps, loyalty probes had been haphazard. Oaths, examinations, wire-tappings, were not enough. The theory that each person had to prove his loyalty was fine — as a theory. In practice few people could do it. It looked as if the concept of guilty until proved innocent might have to be abandoned and the Roman law restored.

The problem, apparently insoluble, had found its answer in the Madagascar Blast of 2004. Waves of hard radiation had lapped over several thousand troops stationed in the area. Of those who lived, few produced subsequent progeny. But of the several hundred children born to the survivors of the blast, many showed neural characteristics of a radically new kind. A human mutant had come into being — for the first time in thousands of years.

The teeps appeared by accident. But they solved the most pressing problem the Free Union faced: the detection and punishment of disloyalty. The teeps were invaluable to the Government of the Free Union — and the teeps knew it.

“You got this?” Ross asked, tapping the hood.

Abbud nodded. “Yes.”

The youth was following his thoughts, not his spoken words. Ross flushed angrily. “What was the man like?” he demanded harshly. “The memo plate gives no details.”

“Doctor Franklin is his name. Director of the Federal Resources Commission. Sixty-seven years of age. Here on a visit to a relative.”

“Walter Franklin! I’ve heard of him.” Ross stared up at Abbud. “Then you already —”

“As soon as I removed the hood I was able to scan him.”

“Where did Franklin go after the assault?”

“Indoors. Instructed by the police.”

“They arrived?”

“After the hood had been taken, of course. It went perfectly. Franklin was spotted by another telepath, not myself. I was informed Franklin was coming my way. When he reached me I shouted that he was wearing a hood. A crowd collected and others took up the shout. The other telepath arrived and we manipulated the crowd until we were near him. I took the hood myself — and you know the rest.”

Ross was silent for a moment. “Do you know how he got the hood? Did you scan that?”

“He received it by mail.”

“Does he —”

“He has no idea who sent it or where it came from.”

Ross frowned. “Then he can’t give us any information about them. The senders.”

“The Hood Makers,” Abbud said icily.

Ross glanced quickly up. “What?”

“The Hood Makers. *Somebody* makes them.” Abbud’s face was hard. *“Somebody* is making probe screens to keep us out.”

“And you’re sure —”

“Franklin knows nothing! He arrived in the city last night. This morning his mail machine brought the hood. For a time he deliberated. Then he purchased a hat and put it on over the hood. He set out on foot toward his niece’s house. We spotted him several minutes later, when he entered range.”

“There seem to be more of them, these days. More hoods being sent out. But you know that.” Ross set his jaw. “We’ve got to locate the senders.”

“It’ll take time. They apparently wear hoods constantly.” Abbud’s face twisted. “We have to get so damn close! Our scanning range is extremely limited. But sooner or later we’ll locate one of them. Sooner or later we’ll tear a hood off somebody — and find *him.*…”

“In the last year five thousand hood-wearers have been detected,” Ross stated. “Five thousand — and not one of them knows anything. Where the hoods come from or who makes them.”

“When there are more of us, we’ll have a better chance,” Abbud said grimly. “Right now there are too few of us. But eventually —”

“You’re going to have Franklin probed, aren’t you?” Peters said to Ross. “As a matter of course.”

“I suppose so.” Ross nodded to Abbud. “You might as well go ahead on him. Have one of your group run the regular total probe and see if there’s anything of interest buried down in his non-conscious neural area. Report the results to me in the usual way.”

Abbud reached into his coat. He brought out a tape spool and tossed it down on the desk in front of Ross. “Here you are.”

“What’s this?”

“The total probe on Franklin. All levels — completely searched and recorded.”

Ross stared up at the youth. “You —”

“We went ahead with it.” Abbud moved toward the door. “It’s a good job. Cummings did it. We found considerable disloyalty. Mostly ideological rather than overt. You’ll probably want to pick him up. When he was twenty-four he found some old books and musical records. He was strongly influenced. The latter part of the tape discusses fully our evaluation of his deviation.”

The door melted and Abbud left.

Ross and Peters stared after him. Finally Ross took the tape spool and put it with the bent metal hood.

“I’ll be damned,” Peters said. “They went ahead with the probe.”

Ross nodded, deep in thought. “Yeah. And I’m not sure I like it.”

The two men glanced at each other — and knew, as they did so, that outside the office Ernest Abbud was scanning their thoughts.

“Damn it!” Ross said futilely. “Damn it!”

Walter Franklin breathed rapidly, peering around him. He wiped nervous sweat from his lined face with a trembling hand.

Down the corridor the echoing clang of Clearance agents sounded, growing louder.

He had got away from the mob — spared for a while. That was four hours ago. Now the sun had set and evening was settling over greater New York. He had managed to make his way half across the city, almost to the outskirts — and now a public alarm was out for his arrest.

Why? He had worked for the Free Union Government all his life. He had done nothing disloyal. Nothing, except open the morning mail, find the hood, deliberate about it, and finally put it on. He remembered the small instruction tag:

GREETINGS!

This probe screen is sent to you with the

compliments of the maker and the earnest

hope that it will be of some value to you.

Thank you.

Nothing else. No other information. For a long time he had pondered. Should he wear it? He had never done anything. He had nothing to hide — nothing disloyal to the Union. But the thought fascinated him. If he wore the hood his mind would be his own. Nobody could look into it. His mind would belong to him again, private, secret, to think as he wished, endless thoughts for no one else's consumption but his own.

Finally he had made up his mind and put on the hood, fitting his old Homburg over it. He had gone outside — and within ten minutes a mob was screaming and yelling around him. And now a general alarm was out for his arrest.

Franklin wracked his brain desperately. What could he do? They could bring him up before a Clearance Board. No accusation would be brought: it would be up to him to clear himself, to prove he was loyal. *Had* he ever done anything wrong? Was there something he had done he was forgetting? He had put on the hood. Maybe that was it. There was some sort of an Anti-

Immunity bill up in Congress to make wearing of a probe screen a felony, but it hadn’t been passed yet —

The Clearance agents were near, almost on him. He retreated down the corridor of the hotel, glancing desperately around him. A red sign glowed: EXIT. He hurried toward it and down a flight of basement stairs, out onto a dark street. It was bad to be outside, where the mobs were. He had tried to remain indoors as much as possible. But now there was no choice.

Behind him a voice shrilled loudly. Something cut past him, smoking away a section of the pavement. A Slem-ray. Franklin ran, gasping for breath, around a corner and down a side street. People glanced at him curiously as he rushed past.

He crossed a busy street and moved with a surging group of theater goers. Had the agents seen him? He peered nervously around. None in sight.

At the corner he crossed with the lights. He reached the safety zone in the center, watching a sleek Clearance car cruising toward him. Had it seen him go out to the safety zone? He left the zone, heading toward the curb on the far side. The Clearance car shot suddenly forward, gaining speed. Another appeared, coming the other way.

Franklin reached the curb.

The first car ground to a halt. Clearance agents piled out, swarming up onto the sidewalk.

He was trapped. There was no place to hide. Around him tired shoppers and office workers gazed curiously, their faces devoid of sympathy. A few grinned at him in vacant amusement. Franklin peered frantically around. No place, no door, no person —

A car pulled up in front of him, its doors sliding open. “Get in.” A young girl leaned toward him, her pretty face urgent. “Get in, damn it!”

He got in. The girl slammed the doors and the car picked up speed. A Clearance car swung in ahead of them, its sleek bulk blocking the street. A second Clearance car moved in behind them.

The girl leaned forward, gripping the controls. Abruptly the car lifted. It left the street, clearing the cars ahead, gaining altitude rapidly. A flash of violet lit up the sky behind them.

"Get down!" the girl snapped. Franklin sank down in his seat. The car moved in a wide arc, passing beyond the protective columns of a row of buildings. On the ground, the Clearance cars gave up and turned back.

Franklin settled back, mopping his forehead shakily. "Thanks," he muttered.

"Don't mention it." The girl increased the car's speed. They were leaving the business section of the city, moving above the residential outskirts. She steered silently, intent on the sky ahead.

"Who are you?" Franklin asked.

The girl tossed something back to him. "Put that on."

A hood. Franklin unfastened it and slipped it awkwardly over his head. "It's in place."

"Otherwise they'll get us with a teep scan. We have to be careful all the time."

"Where are we going?"

The girl turned to him, studying him with calm gray eyes, one hand resting on the wheel. "We're going to the Hood Maker," she said. "The public alarm for you is top priority. If I let you off you won't last an hour."

“But I don’t understand.” Franklin shook his head, dazed. “Why do they want me? What have I done?”

“You’re being framed.” The girl brought the car around in a wide arc, wind whistling shrilly through its struts and fenders. “Framed by the teeps. Things are happening fast. There’s no time to lose.”

The little bald-headed man removed his glasses and held out his hand to Franklin, peering near-sightedly. “I’m glad to meet you, Doctor. I’ve followed your work at the Board with great interest.”

“Who are you?” Franklin demanded.

The little man grinned self-consciously. “I’m James Cutter. The Hood Maker, as the teeps call me. This is our factory.” He waved around the room. “Take a look at it.”

Franklin gazed around him. He was in a warehouse, an ancient wooden building of the last century. Giant worm-scored beams rose up, dry and cracking. The floor was concrete. Old-fashioned fluorescent lights glinted and flickered from the roof. The walls were streaked with water stains and bulging pipes.

Franklin moved across the room, Cutter beside him. He was bewildered. Everything had happened fast. He seemed to be outside New York, in some dilapidated industrial suburb. Men were working on all sides of him, bent over stampers and molds. The air was hot. An archaic fan whirred. The warehouse echoed and vibrated with a constant din.

“This —” Franklin murmured. “This is —”

“This is where we make the hoods. Not very impressive, is it? Later on we hope to move to new quarters. Come along and I’ll show you the rest.”

Cutter pushed a side door open and they entered a small laboratory, bottles and retorts everywhere in cluttered confusion. “We do our research in here. Pure and applied. We’ve learned a few things. Some we may use, some we hope won’t be needed. And it keeps our refugees busy.”

“Refugees?”

Cutter pushed some equipment back and seated himself on a lab table. “Most of the others are here for the same reason as you. Framed by the teeps. Accused of deviation. But we got to them first.”

“But why —”

“Why were you framed? Because of your position. Director of a Government Department. All these men were prominent — and all were framed by teep probes.” Cutter lit a cigarette, leaning back against the water-stained wall. “We exist because of a discovery made ten years ago in a Government lab.” He tapped his hood. “This alloy — opaque to probes. Discovered by accident, by one of these men. Teeps came after him instantly, but he escaped. He made a number of hoods and passed them to other workers in his field. That’s how we got started.”

“How many are here?”

Cutter laughed. “Can’t tell you that. Enough to turn out hoods and keep them circulating. To people prominent in Government. People holding positions of authority. Scientists, officials, educators —”

“Why?”

“Because we want to get them first, before the teeps. We got to you too late. A total probe report had *already* been made out on you, before the hood was even in the mail.

“The teeps are gradually getting a stranglehold over the Government. They’re picking off the best men, denouncing them and getting them arrested. If a teep says a man is disloyal Clearance has to haul him in. We tried to get a hood to you in time. The report couldn’t be passed on to Clearance if you were wearing a hood. But they outsmarted us. They got a mob after you and snatched the hood. As soon as it was off they served the report to Clearance.”

“So that’s why they wanted it off.”

“The teeps can’t file a framed report on a man whose mind is opaque to probes. Clearance isn’t that stupid. The teeps have to get the hoods off. Every man wearing a hood is a man out of bounds. They’ve managed so far by stirring up mobs — but that’s ineffectual. Now they’re working on this bill in Congress. Senator Waldo’s Anti-Immunity Bill. It would outlaw wearing hoods.” Cutter grinned ironically. “If a man is innocent why shouldn’t he want his mind probed? The bill makes wearing a probe shield a felony. People who receive hoods will turn them over to Clearance. There won’t be a man in ten thousand who’ll keep his hood, if it means prison and confiscation of property.”

“I met Waldo, once. I can’t believe he understands what his bill would do. If he could be made to see —”

“Exactly! If he could be made to see. This bill has to be stopped. If it goes through we’re licked. And the teeps are in. Somebody has to talk to Waldo and make him see the situation.” Cutter’s eyes were bright. “You know the man. He’ll remember you.”

“What do you mean?”

“Franklin, we’re sending you back again — to meet Waldo. It’s our only chance to stop the bill. And it has to be stopped.”

The cruiser roared over the Rockies, brush and tangled forest flashing by below. “There’s a level pasture over to the right,” Cutter said. “I’ll set her down, if I can find it.”

He snapped off the jets. The roar died into silence. They were coasting above the hills.

“To the right,” Franklin said.

Cutter brought the cruiser down in a sweeping glide. “This will put us within walking distance of Waldo’s estate. We’ll go the rest of the way on foot.” A shuddering growl shook them as the landing fins dug into the ground — and they were at rest.

Around them tall trees moved faintly with the wind. It was mid-morning. The air was cool and thin. They were high up, still in the mountains, on the Colorado side.

“What are the chances of our reaching him?” Franklin asked.

“Not very good.”

Franklin started. “Why? Why not?”

Cutter pushed the cruiser door back and leaped out onto the ground. “Come on.” He helped Franklin out and slammed the door after him. “Waldo is guarded. He’s got a wall of robots around him. That’s why we’ve never tried before. If it weren’t crucial we wouldn’t be trying now.”

They left the pasture, making their way down the hill along a narrow weed-covered path. “What are they doing it for?” Franklin asked. “The teeps. Why do they want to get power?”

“Human nature, I suppose.”

“*Human* nature?”

“The teeps are no different from the Jacobins, the Roundheads, the Nazis, the Bolsheviks. There’s always some group that wants to lead mankind — for its own good, of course.”

“Do the teeps believe that?”

“Most teeps believe they’re the natural leaders of mankind. Non-telepathic humans are an inferior species. Teeps are the next step, *homo superior.* And because they’re superior, it’s natural they should lead. Make all the decisions for us.”

“And you don’t agree,” Franklin said.

“The teeps are different from us — but that doesn’t mean they’re superior. A telepathic faculty doesn’t imply general superiority. The teeps aren’t a superior race. They’re human beings with a special ability. But that doesn’t give them a right to tell us what to do. It’s not a new problem.”

“Who should lead mankind, then?” Franklin asked. “Who should be the leaders?”

“*Nobody* should lead mankind. It should lead itself.” Cutter leaned forward suddenly, body tense.

“We’re almost there. Waldo’s estate is directly ahead. Get ready. Everything depends on the next few minutes.”

“A few robot guards.” Cutter lowered his binoculars. “But that’s not what’s worrying me. If Waldo has a teep nearby, he’ll detect our hoods.”

“And we can’t take them off.”

“No. The whole thing would be out, passed from teep to teep.” Cutter moved cautiously forwards. “The robots will stop us and demand identification. We’ll have to count on your Director’s clip.”

They left the bushes, crossing the open field toward the buildings that made up Senator Waldo’s estate. They came onto a dirt road and followed it, neither of them speaking, watching the landscape ahead.

“Halt!” A robot guard appeared, streaking toward them across the field. “Identify yourselves!”

Franklin showed his clip. “I’m Director level. We’re here to see the Senator. I’m an old friend.”

Automatic relays clicked as the robot studied the identification clip. “From the Director level?”

“That’s right,” Franklin said, becoming uneasy.

“Get out of the way,” Cutter said impatiently. “We don’t have any time to waste.”

The robot withdrew uncertainly. “Sorry to have stopped you, sir. The Senator is inside the main building. Directly ahead.”

“All right.” Cutter and Franklin advanced past the robot. Sweat stood out on Cutter’s round face. “We made it,” he murmured. “Now let’s hope there aren’t any teeps inside.”

Franklin reached the porch. He stepped slowly up, Cutter behind him. At the door he halted, glancing at the smaller man. “Shall I —”

“Go ahead.” Cutter was tense. “Let’s get right inside. It’s safer.”

Franklin raised his hand. The door clicked sharply as its lens photographed him and checked his image. Franklin prayed silently. If the Clearance alarm had been sent out this far —

The door melted.

“Inside,” Cutter said quickly.

Franklin entered, looking around in the semi-darkness. He blinked, adjusting to the dim light of the hall. Somebody was coming toward him. A shape, a small shape, coming rapidly, lithely. Was it Waldo?

A lank, sallow-faced youth entered the hall, a fixed smile on his face. “Good morning, Doctor Franklin,” he said. He raised his Slem-gun and fired.

Cutter and Ernest Abbud stared down at the oozing mass that had been Doctor Franklin. Neither of them spoke. Finally Cutter raised his hand, his face drained of color.

“Was that necessary?”

Abbud shifted, suddenly conscious of him. “Why not?” He shrugged, the Slem-gun pointed at Cutter’s stomach. “He was an old man. He wouldn’t have lasted long in the protective-custody camp.”

Cutter took out his package of cigarettes and lit up slowly, his eyes on the youth’s face. He had never seen Ernest Abbud before. But he knew who he was. He watched the sallow-faced youth kick idly at the remains on the floor.

“Then Waldo is a teep,” Cutter said.

“Yes.”

“Franklin was wrong. He *does* have full understanding of his bill.”

“Of course! The Anti-Immunity Bill is an integral part of our activity.” Abbud waved the snout of the Slem-gun. “Remove your hood. I can’t scan you — and it makes me uneasy.”

Cutter hesitated. He dropped his cigarette thoughtfully to the floor and crushed it underfoot. “What are you doing here? You usually hang out in New York. This is a long way out here.”

Abbud smiled. “We picked up Doctor Franklin’s thoughts as he entered the girl’s car — before she gave him the hood. She waited too long. We got a distinct visual image of her, seen from the back seat, of course. But she turned around to give him the hood. Two hours ago Clearance picked her up. She knew a great deal — our first real contact. We were able to locate the factory and round up most of the workers.”

“Oh?” Cutter murmured.

“They’re in protective custody. Their hoods are gone — and the supply stored for distribution. The stampers have been dismantled. As far as I know we have all the group. You’re the last one.”

“Then does it matter if I keep my hood?”

Abbud’s eyes flickered. “Take it off. I want to scan you — Mister Hood Maker.”

Cutter grunted. “What do you mean?”

“Several of your men gave us images of you — and details of your trip here. I came out personally, notifying Waldo through our relay system in advance. I wanted to be here myself.”

“Why?”

“It’s an occasion. A great occasion.”

“What position do *you* hold?” Cutter demanded.

Abbud’s sallow face turned ugly. “Come on! Off with the hood! I could blast you now. But I want to scan you first.”

“All right. I’ll take it off. You can scan me, if you want. Probe all the way down.” Cutter paused, reflecting soberly. “It’s your funeral.”

“What do you mean?”

Cutter removed his hood, tossing it onto a table by the door. “Well? What do you see? What do I know — *that none of the others knew?”*

For a moment Abbud was silent.

Suddenly his face twitched, his mouth working. The Slem-gun swayed. Abbud staggered, a violent shudder leaping through his lank frame. He gaped at Cutter in rising horror.

“I learned it only recently,” Cutter said. “In our lab. I didn’t want to use it — but you forced me to take off my hood. I always considered the alloy my most important discovery — until this. In some ways, this is even more important. Don’t you agree?”

Abbud said nothing. His face was a sickly gray. His lips moved but no sound came.

“I had a hunch — and I played it for all it was worth. I knew you telepaths were born from a single group, resulting from an accident — the Madagascar hydrogen explosion. That made me think. Most mutants, that we know of, are thrown off universally by the species that’s reached the

mutation stage. Not a single group in one area. The whole world, wherever the species exists.

"Damage to the germ plasma of a specific group of humans is the cause of your existence. You weren't a mutant in the sense that you represented a natural development of the evolutionary process. In no sense could it be said that homo sapiens had reached the mutation stage. So perhaps you weren't a mutant.

"I began to make studies, some biological, some merely statistical. Sociological research. We began correlating facts on you, on each member of your group we could locate. How old you were. What you were doing for a living. How many were married. Number of children. After a while I came across the facts you're scanning right now."

Cutter leaned toward Abbud, watching the youth intently.

"You're not a true mutant, Abbud. Your group exists because of a chance explosion. You're different from us because of damage to the reproductive apparatus of your parents. You lack one specific characteristic that true mutants possess." A faint smile twitched across Cutter's features. "A lot of you are married. But not one birth has been reported. Not one birth! Not a single teep child! You can't reproduce, Abbud. You're *sterile*, the whole lot of you. When you die there won't be any more.

"You're not mutants. You're freaks!"

Abbud grunted hoarsely, his body trembling. "I see this, in your mind." He pulled himself together with an effort. "And you've kept this secret, have you? You're the only one who knows?"

"Somebody else knows," Cutter said.

"Who?"

"*You* know. You scanned me. And since you're a teep, all the others —"

Abbud fired, the Slem-gun digging frantically into his own middle. He dissolved, showering in a rain of fragments. Cutter moved back, his hands over his face. He closed his eyes, holding his breath.

When he looked again there was nothing.

Cutter shook his head. "Too late, Abbud. Not fast enough. Scanning is instant — and Waldo is within range. The relay system… And even if they missed *you,* they can't avoid picking me up."

A sound. Cutter turned. Clearance agents were moving rapidly into the hall, glancing down at the remains on the floor and up at Cutter.

Director Ross covered Cutter uncertainly, confused and shaken. "What happened here? Where —"

"Scan him!" Peters snapped. "Get a teep in here quick. Bring Waldo in. Find out what happened."

Cutter grinned ironically. "Sure," he said, nodding shakily. He sagged with relief. "Scan me. I have nothing to hide. Get a teep in here for a probe — if you can find any…"

Of Withered Apples

Something was tapping on the window. Blowing up against the pane, again and again. Carried by the wind. Tapping faintly, insistently.

Lori, sitting on the couch, pretended not to hear. She gripped her book tightly and turned a page. The tapping came again, louder and more imperative. It could not be ignored.

“Darn!” Lori said, throwing her book down on the coffee table and hurrying to the window. She grasped the heavy brass handles and lifted.

For a moment the window resisted. Then, with a protesting groan, it reluctantly rose. Cold autumn air rushed into the room. The bit of leaf ceased tapping and swirled against the woman’s throat, dancing to the floor.

Lori picked the leaf up. It was old and brown. Her heart skipped a beat as she slipped the leaf into the pocket of her jeans. Against her loins the leaf cut and tingled, a little hard point piercing her smooth skin and sending exciting shivers up and down her spine. She stood at the open window a moment, sniffing the air. The air was full of the presence of trees and rocks, of great boulders and remote places. It was time — time to go again. She touched the leaf. She was *wanted.*

Quickly Lori left the big livingroom, hurrying through the hall into the dining-room. The dining-room was empty. A few chords of laughter drifted from the kitchen. Lori pushed the kitchen door open. “Steve?”

Her husband and his father were sitting around the kitchen table, smoking their cigars and drinking steaming black coffee. “What is it?” Steve demanded, frowning at his young wife. “Ed and I are in the middle of business.”

“I — I want to ask you something.”

The two men gazed at her, brown-haired Steven, his dark eyes full of the stubborn dignity of New England men, and his father, silent and withdrawn in her presence. Ed Patterson scarcely noticed her. He rustled through a sheaf of feed bills, his broad back turned toward her.

“What is it?” Steve demanded impatiently. “What do you want? Can’t it wait?”

“I have to go,” Lori blurted.

“Go where?”

“Outside.” Anxiety flooded over her. “This is the last time. I promise. I won’t go again, after this. Okay?” She tried to smile, but her heart was pounding too hard. “Please let me, Steve.”

“Where does she go?” Ed rumbled.

Steve grunted in annoyance. “Up in the hills. Some old abandoned place up there.”

Ed’s gray eyes flickered. “Abandoned farm?”

“Yes. You know it?”

“The old Rickley farm. Rickley moved away years ago. Couldn’t get anything to grow, not up there. Ground’s all rocks. Bad soil. A lot of clay and stones. The place is all overgrown, tumbled down.”

“What kind of farm was it?”

“Orchard. Fruit orchard. Never yielded a damn thing. Thin old trees. Waste of effort.”

Steve looked at his pocket watch. “You’ll be back in time to fix dinner?”

“Yes!” Lori moved toward the door. “Then I can go?”

Steve’s face twisted as he made up his mind. Lori waited impatiently, scarcely breathing. She had never got used to Vermont men and their slow, deliberate way. Boston people were quite different. And her group had been more the college youths, dances and talk, and late laughter.

“Why do you go up there?” Steve grumbled.

“Don’t ask me, Steve. Just let me go. This is the last time.” She writhed in agony. She clenched her fists. “Please!”

Steve looked out the window. The cold autumn wind swirled through the trees. “All right. But it’s going to snow. I don’t see why you want to —”

Lori ran to get her coat from the closet. “I’ll be back to fix dinner!” she shouted joyfully. She hurried to the front porch, buttoning her coat, her heart racing. Her cheeks were flushed a deep, excited red as she closed the door behind her, her blood pounding in her veins.

Cold wind whipped against her, rumpling her hair, plucking at her body. She took a deep breath of the wind and started down the steps.

She walked rapidly onto the field, toward the bleak line of hills beyond. Except for the wind there was no sound. She patted her pocket. The dry leaf broke and dug hungrily into her.

“I’m coming…” she whispered, a little awed and frightened. “I’m on my way…”

Higher and higher the woman climbed. She passed through a deep cleft between two rocky ridges. Huge roots from old stumps spurted out on all sides. She followed a dried-up creek bed, winding and turning.

After a time low mists began to blow about her. At the top of the ridge she halted, breathing deeply, looking back the way she had come.

A few drops of rain stirred the leaves around her. Again the wind moved through the great dead trees along the ridge. Lori turned and started on, her head down, hands in her coat pockets.

She was on a rocky field, overgrown with weeds and dead grass. After a time she came to a ruined fence, broken and rotting. She stepped over it. She passed a tumbled-down well, half filled with stones and earth.

Her heart beat quickly, fluttering with nervous excitement. She was almost there. She passed the remains of a building, sagging timbers and broken glass, a few ruined pieces of furniture strewn nearby. An old automobile tire caked and cracked. Some damp rags heaped over rusty, bent bedsprings.

And there it was — directly ahead.

Along the edge of the field was a grove of ancient trees. Lifeless trees, withered and dead, their thin, blackened stalks rising up leaflessly. Broken sticks stuck in the hard ground. Row after row of dead trees, some bent and leaning, torn loose from the rocky soil by the unending wind.

Lori crossed the field to the trees, her lungs laboring painfully. The wind surged against her without respite, whipping the foul-smelling mists into her nostrils and face. Her smooth skin was damp and shiny with the mist. She coughed and hurried on, stepping over the rocks and clods of earth, trembling with fear and anticipation.

She circled around the grove of trees, almost to the edge of the ridge. Carefully, she stepped among the sliding heaps of rocks. Then —

She stopped, rigid. Her chest rose and fell with the effort of breathing. “I came,” she gasped.

For a long time she gazed at the withered old apple tree. She could not take her eyes from it. The sight of the ancient tree fascinated and repelled her. It was the only one alive, the only tree of all the grove still living. All the others were dead, dried-up. They had lost the struggle. But this tree still clung to life.

The tree was hard and barren. Only a few dark leaves hung from it — and some withered apples, dried and seasoned by the wind and mists. They had stayed there, on the branches, forgotten and abandoned. The ground around the tree was cracked and bleak. Stones and decayed heaps of old leaves in ragged clumps.

“I came,” Lori said again. She took the leaf from her pocket and held it cautiously out. “This tapped at the window. I knew when I heard it.” She smiled mischievously, her red lips curling. “It tapped and tapped, trying to get in. I ignored it. It was so — so impetuous. It annoyed me.”

The tree swayed ominously. Its gnarled branches rubbed together. Something in the sound made Lori pull away. Terror rushed through her. She hurried back along the ridge, scrambling frantically out of reach.

“Don’t,” she whispered. *“Please.”*

The wind ceased. The tree became silent. For a long time Lori watched it apprehensively.

Night was coming. The sky was darkening rapidly. A burst of frigid wind struck her, half turning her around. She shuddered, bracing herself against it, pulling her long coat around her. Far below, the floor of the valley was disappearing into shadow, into the vast cloud of night.

In the darkening mists the tree was stern and menacing, more ominous than usual. A few leaves blew from it, drifting and swirling with the wind. A leaf blew past her and she tried to catch it. The leaf escaped, dancing

back toward the tree. Lori followed a little way and then stopped, gasping and laughing.

“No,” she said firmly, her hands on her hips. “I won’t.”

There was silence. Suddenly the heaps of decayed leaves blew up in a furious circle around the tree. They quieted down, settling back.

“No,” Lori said. “I’m not afraid of you. You can’t hurt me.” But her heart was hammering with fear. She moved back farther away.

The tree remained silent. Its wiry branches were motionless.

Lori regained her courage. “This is the last time I can come,” she said. “Steve says I can’t come any more. He doesn’t like it.”

She waited, but the tree did not respond.

“They’re sitting in the kitchen. The two of them. Smoking cigars and drinking coffee. Adding up feed bills.” She wrinkled her nose. “That’s all they ever do. Add and subtract feed bills. Figure and figure. Profit and loss. Government taxes. Depreciation on the equipment.”

The tree did not stir.

Lori shivered. A little more rain fell, big icy drops that slid down her cheeks, down the back of her neck and inside her heavy coat.

She moved closer to the tree. “I won’t be back. I won’t see you again. This is the last time. I wanted to tell you…”

The tree moved. Its branches whipped into sudden life. Lori felt something hard and thin cut across her shoulder. Something caught her around the waist, tugging her forward.

She struggled desperately, trying to pull herself free. Suddenly the tree released her. She stumbled back, laughing and trembling with fear. “No!” she gasped. “You can’t have me!” She hurried to the edge of the ridge. “You’ll never get me again. Understand? And I’m not afraid of you!”

She stood, waiting and watching, trembling with cold and fear. Suddenly she turned and fled, down the side of the ridge, sliding and falling on the loose stones. Blind terror gripped her. She ran on and on, down the steep slope, grabbing at roots and weeds —

Something rolled beside her shoe. Something small and hard. She bent down and picked it up.

It was a little dried apple.

Lori gazed back up the slope at the tree. The tree was almost lost in the swirling mists. It stood, jutting up against the black sky, a hard unmoving pillar.

Lori put the apple in her coat pocket and continued down the side of the hill. When she reached the floor of the valley she took the apple out of her pocket.

It was late. A deep hunger began to gnaw inside her. She thought suddenly of dinner, the warm kitchen, the white tablecloth. Steaming stew and biscuits.

As she walked she nibbled on the little apple.

Lori sat up in bed, the covers falling away from her. The house was dark and silent. A few night noises sounded faintly, far off. It was past midnight. Beside her Steven slept quietly, turned over on his side.

What had wakened her? Lori pushed her dark hair back out of her eyes, shaking her head. What —

A spasm of pain burst loose inside her. She gasped and put her hand to her stomach. For a time she wrestled silently, jaws locked, swaying back and forth.

The pain went away. Lori sank back. She cried out, a faint, thin cry. “Steve —”

Steven stirred. He turned over a little, grunting in his sleep. The pain came again. Harder. She fell forward on her face, writhing in agony. The pain ripped at her, tearing at her belly. She screamed, a shrill wail of fear and pain.

Steve sat up. “For God’s sake —” He rubbed his eyes and snapped on the lamp. “What the hell —”

Lori lay on her side, gasping and moaning, her eyes staring, knotted fists pressed into her stomach. The pain twisted and seared, devouring her, eating into her. “Lori!” Steven grated. “What is it?”

She screamed. Again and again. Until the house rocked with echoes. She slid from the bed, onto the floor, her body writhing and jerking, her face unrecognizable.

Ed came hurrying into the room, pulling his bathrobe around him. “What’s going on?”

The two men stared helplessly down at the woman on the floor.

“Good God,” Ed said. He closed his eyes.

The day was cold and dark. Snow fell silently over the streets and houses, over the red brick county hospital building. Doctor Blair walked slowly up the gravel path to his Ford car. He slid inside and turned the ignition key. The motor leaped alive, and he let the brake out.

“I’ll call you later,” Doctor Blair said. “There are certain particulars.”

“I know,” Steve muttered. He was still dazed. His face was gray and puffy from lack of sleep.

“I left some sedatives for you. Try to get a little rest.”

“You think,” Steve asked suddenly, “if we had called you earlier —”

“No.” Blair glanced up at him sympathetically. “I don’t. In a thing like that, there’s not much chance. Not after it’s burst.”

“Then it *was* appendicitis?”

Blair nodded. “Yes.”

“If we hadn’t been so damn far out,” Steve said bitterly. “Stuck out in the country. No hospital. Nothing. Miles from town. And we didn’t realize at first —”

“Well, it’s over now.” The upright Ford moved forward a little. All at once a thought came to the doctor. “One more thing.”

“What is it?” Steve said dully.

Blair hesitated. “Post mortems — very unfortunate. I don’t think there’s any reason for one in this case. I’m certain in my own mind… But I wanted to ask —”

“What is it?”

“Is there anything the girl might have swallowed? Did she put things in her mouth? Needles — while she was sewing? Pins, coins, anything like that? Seeds? Did she ever eat watermelon? Sometimes the appendix —”

“No.” Steve shook his head wearily. “I don’t know.”

“It was just a thought.” Doctor Blair drove slowly off down the narrow tree-lined street, leaving two dark streaks, two soiled lines that marred the packed, glistening snow.

Spring came, warm and sunny. The ground turned black and rich. Overhead the sun shone, a hot white orb, full of strength.

“Stop here,” Steve murmured.

Ed Patterson brought the car to a halt at the side of the street. He turned off the motor. The two men sat in silence, neither of them speaking.

At the end of the street children were playing. A high school boy was mowing a lawn, pushing the machine over wet grass. The street was dark in the shade of the great trees growing along each side.

“Nice,” Ed said.

Steve nodded without answering. Moodily, he watched a young girl walking by, a shopping bag under her arm. The girl climbed the stairs of a porch and disappeared into an old-fashioned yellow house.

Steve pushed the car door open. “Come on. Let’s get it over with.”

Ed lifted the wreath of flowers from the back seat and put them in his son’s lap. “You’ll have to carry it. It’s your job.”

“All right.” Steve grabbed the flowers and stepped out onto the pavement.

The two men walked up the street together, silent and thoughtful.

“It’s been seven or eight months, now,” Steve said abruptly.

“At least.” Ed lit a cigar as they walked along, puffing clouds of gray smoke around them. “Maybe a little more.”

“I never should have brought her up here. She lived in town all her life. She didn’t know anything about the country.”

“It would have happened anyhow.”

“If we had been closer to a hospital —”

The doctor said it wouldn’t have made any difference. Even if we’d called him right away instead of waiting until morning.” They came to the corner and turned. “And as you know —”

“Forget it,” Steve said, suddenly tense.

The sounds of the children had fallen behind them. The houses had thinned out. Their footsteps rang out against the pavement as they walked along.

“We’re almost there,” Steve said.

They came to a rise. Beyond the rise was a heavy brass fence, running the length of a small field. A green field, neat and even. With carefully placed plaques of white marble crisscrossing it.

“Here we are,” Steve said tightly.

“They keep it nice.”

“Can we get in from this side?”

“We can try.” Ed started along the brass fence, looking for a gate.

Suddenly Steve halted, grunting. He stared across the field, his face white. *“Look.”*

“What is it?” Ed took off his glasses to see. “What are you looking at?”

“I was right.” Steve’s voice was low and indistinct. “I thought there was something. Last time we were here… I saw… You see it?”

“I’m not sure. I see the tree, if that’s what you mean.”

In the center of the neat green field the little apple tree rose proudly. Its bright leaves sparkled in the warm sunlight. The young tree was strong and very healthy. It swayed confidently with the wind, its supple trunk moist with sweet spring sap.

“They’re *red,”* Steve said softly. “They’re already red. How the hell can they be red? It’s only April. How the hell can they be red so soon?”

“I don’t know,” Ed said. “I don’t know anything about apples.” A strange chill moved through him. But graveyards always made him uncomfortable. “Maybe we ought to go.”

“Her cheeks were that color,” Steve said, his voice low. “When she had been running. Remember?”

The two men gazed uneasily at the little apple tree, its shiny red fruit glistening in the spring sunlight, branches moving gently with the wind.

“I remember, all right,” Ed said grimly. “Come on.” He took his son’s arm insistently, the wreath of flowers forgotten. “Come on, Steve. Let’s get out of here.”

Human Is

Jill Herrick's blue eyes filled with tears. She gazed at her husband in unspeakable horror. "You're — you're hideous!" she wailed.

Lester Herrick continued working, arranging heaps of notes and graphs in precise piles.

"Hideous," he stated, "is a value judgment. It contains no factual information." He sent a report tape on Centauran parasitic life whizzing through the desk scanner. "Merely an opinion. An expression of emotion, nothing more."

Jill stumbled back to the kitchen. Listlessly, she waved her hand to trip the stove into activity. Conveyor belts in the wall hummed to life, hurrying the food from the underground storage lockers for the evening meal.

She turned to face her husband one last time. "Not even a *little* while?" she begged. "Not even —"

"Not even for a month. When he comes you can tell him. If you haven't the courage, I'll do it. I can't have a child running around here. I have too much work to do. This report on Betelgeuse XI is due in ten days." Lester dropped a spool on Fomalhautan fossil implements into the scanner. "What's the matter with your brother? Why can't he take care of his own child?"

Jill dabbed at swollen eyes. "Don't you understand? I *want* Gus here! I begged Frank to let him come. And now you —"

"I'll be glad when he's old enough to be turned over to the Government." Lester's thin face twisted in annoyance. "Damn it, Jill, isn't dinner ready yet? It's been ten minutes! What's wrong with that stove?"

“It’s almost ready.” The stove showed a red signal light. The robant waiter had come out of the wall and was waiting expectantly to take the food.

Jill sat down and blew her small nose violently. In the livingroom, Lester worked on unperturbed. His work. His research. Day after day. Lester was getting ahead; there was no doubt of that. His lean body was bent like a coiled spring over the tape scanner, cold gray eyes taking in the information feverishly, analyzing, appraising, his conceptual faculties operating like well-greased machinery.

Jill’s lips trembled in misery and resentment. Gus — little Gus. How could she tell him? Fresh tears welled up in her eyes. Never to see the chubby little fellow again. He could never come back — because his childish laughter and play bothered Lester. Interfered with his research.

The stove clicked to green. The food slid out, into the arms of the robant. Soft chimes sounded to announce dinner.

“I hear it,” Lester grated. He snapped off the scanner and got to his feet. “I suppose he’ll come while we’re eating.”

“I can vid Frank and ask —”

“No. Might as well get it over with.” Lester nodded impatiently to the robant. “All right. Put it down.” His thin lips set in an angry line. “Damn it, don’t dawdle! I want to get back to my work!”

Jill bit back the tears.

Little Gus came trailing into the house as they were finishing dinner.

Jill gave a cry of joy. “Gussie!” She ran to sweep him up in her arms. “I’m so glad to see you!”

“Watch out for my tiger,” Gus muttered. He dropped his little gray kitten onto the rug and it rushed off, under the couch. “He’s hiding.”

Lester’s eyes flickered as he studied the little boy and the tip of gray tail extending from under the couch.

“Why do you call it a tiger? It’s nothing but an alley cat.”

Gus looked hurt. He scowled. “He’s a tiger. He’s got stripes.”

“Tigers are yellow and a great deal bigger. You might as well learn to classify things by their correct names.”

“Lester, please —” Jill pleaded.

“Be quiet,” her husband said crossly. “Gus is old enough to shed childish illusions and develop a realistic orientation. What’s wrong with the psych testers? Don’t they straighten this sort of nonsense out?”

Gus ran and snatched up his tiger. “You leave him alone!”

Lester contemplated the kitten. A strange, cold smile played about his lips. “Come down to the lab some time, Gus. We’ll show you lots of cats. We use them in our research. Cats, guinea pigs, rabbits —”

“Lester!” Jill gasped. “How can you!”

Lester laughed thinly. Abruptly he broke off and returned to his desk. “Now clear out of here. I have to finish these reports. And don’t forget to tell Gus.”

Gus got excited. “Tell me what?” His cheeks flushed. His eyes sparkled. “What is it? Something for me? A *secret*?”

Jill's heart was like lead. She put her hand heavily on the child's shoulder. "Come on, Gus. We'll go sit out in the garden and I'll tell you. Bring — bring your tiger."

A click. The emergency vidsender lit up. Instantly Lester was on his feet. "Be quiet!" He ran to the sender, breathing rapidly. "Nobody speak!"

Jill and Gus paused at the door. A confidential message was sliding from the slot into the dish. Lester grabbed it up and broke the seal. He studied it intently.

"What is it?" Jill asked. "Anything bad?"

"Bad?" Lester's face shone with a deep inner glow. "No, not bad at all." He glanced at his watch. "Just time. Let's see, I'll need —"

"What is it?"

"I'm going on a trip. I'll be gone two or three weeks. Rexor IV is into the charted area."

"Rexor IV? You're going there?" Jill clasped her hands eagerly. "Oh, I've always wanted to see an old system, old ruins and cities! Lester, can I come along? Can I go with you? We never took a vacation, and you always promised —"

Lester Herrick stared at his wife in amazement. "You?" he said. "*You* go along?" He laughed unpleasantly. "Now hurry and get my things together. I've been waiting for this a long time." He rubbed his hands together in satisfaction. "You can keep the boy here until I'm back. But no longer. Rexor IV! I can hardly wait!"

"You have to make allowances," Frank said. "After all, he's a scientist."

“I don’t care,” Jill said. “I’m leaving him. As soon as he gets back from Rexor IV. I’ve made up my mind.”

Her brother was silent, deep in thought. He stretched his feet out, onto the lawn of the little garden. “Well, if you leave him you’ll be free to marry again. You’re still classed as sexually adequate, aren’t you?”

Jill nodded firmly. “You bet I am. I wouldn’t have any trouble. Maybe I can find somebody who likes children.”

“You think a lot of children,” Frank perceived. “Gus loves to visit you. But he doesn’t like Lester. Les needles him.”

“I know. This past week has been heaven, with him gone.” Jill patted her soft blonde hair, blushing prettily. “I’ve had fun. Makes me feel alive again.”

“When’ll he be back?”

“Any day.” Jill clenched her small fists. “We’ve been married five years and every year it’s worse. He’s so — so inhuman. Utterly cold and ruthless. Him and his work. Day and night.”

“Les is ambitious. He wants to get to the top in his field.” Frank lit a cigarette lazily. “A pusher. Well, maybe he’ll do it. What’s he in?”

“Toxicology. He works out new poisons for Military. He invented the copper sulphate skin-lime they used against Callisto.”

“It’s a small field. Now take me.” Frank leaned contentedly against the wall of the house. “There are thousands of Clearance lawyers. I could work for years and never create a ripple. I’m content just to be. I do my job. I enjoy it.”

“I wish Lester felt that way.”

“Maybe he’ll change.”

“He’ll *never* change,” Jill said bitterly. “I know that, now. That’s why I’ve made up my mind to leave him. He’ll always be the same.”

Lester Herrick came back from Rexor IV a different man. Beaming happily, he deposited his anti-grav suitcase in the arms of the waiting robant. “Thank you.”

Jill gasped speechlessly. “Les! What —”

Lester removed his hat, bowing a little. “Good day, my dear. You’re looking lovely. Your eyes are clear and blue. Sparkling like some virgin lake, fed by mountain streams.” He sniffed. “Do I smell a delicious repast warming on the hearth?”

“Oh, Lester.” Jill blinked uncertainly, faint hope swelling in her bosom. “Lester, what’s happened to you? You’re so — so different.”

“Am I, my dear?” Lester moved about the house, touching things and sighing. “What a dear little house. So sweet and friendly. You don’t know how wonderful it is to be here. Believe me.”

“I’m afraid to believe it,” Jill said.

“Believe what?”

“That you mean all this. That you’re not the way you were. The way you’ve always been.”

“What way is that?”

“Mean. Mean and cruel.”

“I?” Lester frowned, rubbing his lip. “Hmm. Interesting.” He brightened. “Well, that’s all in the past. What’s for dinner? I’m faint with hunger.”

Jill eyed him uncertainly as she moved into the kitchen. “Anything you want, Lester. You know our stove covers the maximum select-list.”

“Of course.” Lester coughed rapidly. “Well, shall we try sirloin steak, medium, smothered in onions? With mushroom sauce. And white rolls. With hot coffee. Perhaps ice cream and apple pie for dessert.”

“You never seemed to care much about food,” Jill said thoughtfully.

“Oh?”

“You always said you hoped eventually they’d make intravenous intake universally applicable.” She studied her husband intently. “Lester, what’s happened?”

“Nothing. Nothing at all.” Lester carelessly took his pipe out and lit it rapidly, somewhat awkwardly. Bits of tobacco drifted to the rug. He bent nervously down and tried to pick them up again. “Please go about your tasks and don’t mind me. Perhaps I can help you prepare — that is, can I do anything to help?”

“No,” Jill said. “I can do it. You go ahead with your work, if you want.”

“Work?”

“Your research. In toxins.”

“Toxins!” Lester showed confusion. “Well, for heaven’s sake! Toxins. Devil take it!”

“What dear?”

“I mean, I really feel too tired, just now. I’ll work later.” Lester moved vaguely around the room. “I think I’ll sit and enjoy being home again. Off that awful Rexor IV.”

“Was it awful?”

“Horrible.” A spasm of disgust crossed Lester’s face. “Dry and dead. Ancient. Squeezed to a pulp by wind and sun. A dreadful place, my dear.”

“I’m sorry to hear that. I always wanted to visit it.”

“Heaven forbid!” Lester cried feelingly. “You stay right here, my dear. With me. The — the two of us.” His eyes wandered around the room. “Two, yes. Terra is a wonderful planet. Moist and full of life.” He beamed happily. “Just right.”

“I don’t understand it,” Jill said.

“Repeat all the things you remember,” Frank said. His robot pencil poised itself alertly. “The changes you’ve noticed in him. I’m curious.”

“Why?”

“No reason. Go on. You say you sensed it right away? That he was different?”

“I noticed it at once. The expression on his face. Not that hard, practical look. A sort of mellow look. Relaxed. Tolerant. A sort of calmness.”

“I see,” Frank said. “What else?”

Jill peered nervously through the back door into the house. “He can’t hear us, can he?”

“No. He’s inside playing with Gus. In the livingroom. They’re Venusian otter-men today. Your husband built an otter slide down at his lab. I saw him unwrapping it.”

“His talk.”

“His what?”

The way he talks. His choice of words. Words he never used before. Whole new phrases. Metaphors. I never heard him use a metaphor in all our five years together. He said metaphors were inexact. Misleading. And —”

“And what?” The pencil scratched busily.

“And they’re *strange* words. Old words. Words you don’t hear any more.”

“Archaic phraseology?” Frank asked tensely.

“Yes.” Jill paced back and forth across the small lawn, her hands in the pockets of her plastic shorts. “Formal words. Like something —”

“Something out of a book?”

“Exactly! You’ve noticed it?”

“I noticed it.” Frank’s face was grim. “Go on.”

Jill stopped pacing. “What’s on your mind? Do you have a theory?”

“I want to know more facts.”

She reflected. “He plays. With Gus. He plays and jokes. And he — he eats.”

“Didn’t he eat before?”

“Not like he does now. Now he *loves* food. He goes into the kitchen and tries endless combinations. He and the stove get together and cook up all sorts of weird things.”

“I thought he’d put on weight.”

“He’s gained ten pounds. He eats, smiles and laughs. He’s constantly polite.” Jill glanced away coyly. “He’s even — romantic! He always said *that* was irrational. And he’s not interested in his work. His research in toxins.”

“I see.” Frank chewed his lip. “Anything more?”

“One thing puzzles me very much. I’ve noticed it again and again.”

“What is it?”

“He seems to have strange lapses of —”

A burst of laughter. Lester Herrick, eyes bright with merriment, came rushing out of the house, little Gus close behind.

“We have an announcement!” Lester cried.

“An announzelmen,” Gus echoed.

Frank folded his notes up and slid them into his coat pocket. The pencil hurried after them. He got slowly to his feet. “What is it?”

“You make it,” Lester said, taking little Gus’s hand and leading him forward.

Gus’s plump face screwed up in concentration. “I’m going to come live with you,” he stated. Anxiously he watched Jill’s expression. “Lester says I can. Can I? Can I, Aunt Jill?”

Her heart flooded with incredible joy. She glanced from Gus to Lester. “Do you — do you really mean it?” Her voice was almost inaudible.

Lester put his arm around her, holding her close to him. “Of course, we mean it,” he said gently. His eyes were warm and understanding. “We wouldn’t tease you, my dear.”

“No teasing!” Gus shouted excitedly. “No more teasing!” He and Lester and Jill drew close together. “Never again!”

Frank stood a little way off, his face grim. Jill noticed him and broke away abruptly. “What is it?” she faltered. “Is anything —”

“When you’re quite finished,” Frank said to Lester Herrick, “I’d like you to come with me.”

A chill clutched Jill’s heart. “What is it? Can I come, too?”

Frank shook his head. He moved toward Lester ominously. “Come on, Herrick. Let’s go. You and I are going to take a little trip.”

The three Federal Clearance Agents took up positions a few feet from Lester Herrick, vibro-tubes gripped alertly.

Clearance Director Douglas studied Herrick for a long time. “You’re sure?” he said finally.

“Absolutely,” Frank stated.

“When did he get back from Rexor IV?”

“A week ago.”

“And the change was noticeable at once?”

“His wife noticed it as soon as she saw him. There’s no doubt it occurred on Rexor.” Frank paused significantly. “And you know what that means.”

“I know.” Douglas walked slowly around the seated man, examining him from every angle.

Lester Herrick sat quietly, his coat neatly folded across his knee. He rested his hands on his ivory-topped cane, his face calm and expressionless. He wore a soft gray suit, a subdued necktie, French cuffs, and shiny black shoes. He said nothing.

“Their methods are simple and exact,” Douglas said. “The original psychic contents are removed and stored — in some sort of suspension. The interjection of the substitute contents is instantaneous. Lester Herrick was probably poking around the Rexor city ruins, ignoring the safety precautions — shield or manual screen — and they got him.”

The seated man stirred. “I’d like very much to communicate with Jill,” he murmured. “She surely is becoming anxious.”

Frank turned away, face choked with revulsion. “God. It’s still pretending.”

Director Douglas restrained himself with the greatest effort. “It’s certainly an amazing thing. No physical changes. You could look at it and

never know.” He moved toward the seated man, his face hard. “Listen to me, whatever you call yourself. Can you understand what I say?”

“Of course,” Lester Herrick answered.

“Did you really think you’d get away with it? We caught the others — the ones before you. All ten of them. Even before they got here.” Douglas grinned coldly. “Vibro-rayed them one after another.”

The color left Lester Herrick’s face. Sweat came out on his forehead. He wiped it away with a silk handkerchief from his breast pocket. “Oh?” he murmured.

“You’re not fooling us. All Terra is alerted for you Rexorians. I’m surprised you got off Rexor at all. Herrick must have been extremely careless. We stopped the others aboard ship. Fried them out in deep space.”

“Herrick had a private ship,” the seated man murmured. “He bypassed the check station going in. No record of his arrival existed. He was never checked.”

“Fry it!” Douglas grated. The three Clearance agents lifted their tubes, moving forward.

“No.” Frank shook his head. “We can’t. It’s a bad situation.”

“What do you mean? Why can’t we? We fried the others —”

“They were caught in deep space. This is Terra. Terran law, not military law, applies.” Frank waved toward the seated man. “And it’s in a human body. It comes under regular civil laws. We’ve got to *prove* it’s not Lester Herrick — that it’s a Rexorian infiltrator. It’s going to be tough. But it can be done.”

“How?”

“His wife. Herrick’s wife. Her testimony. Jill Herrick can assert the difference between Lester Herrick and this thing. She knows — and I think we can make it stand up in court.”

It was late afternoon. Frank drove his surface cruiser slowly along. Neither he nor Jill spoke.

“So that’s it,” Jill said at last. Her face was gray. Her eyes dry and bright, without emotion. “I knew it was too good to be true.” She tried to smile. “It seemed so wonderful.”

“I know,” Frank said. “It’s a terrible damn thing. If only —”

“Why?” Jill said. “Why did he — did it do this? Why did it take Lester’s body?”

“Rexor IV is old. Dead. A dying planet. Life is dying out.”

“I remember, now. He — it said something like that. Something about Rexor. That it was glad to get away.”

“The Rexorians are an old race. The few that remain are feeble. They’ve been trying to migrate for centuries. But their bodies are too weak. Some tried to migrate to Venus — and died instantly. They worked out this system about a century ago.”

“But it knows so much. About us. It speaks our language.”

“Not quite. The changes you mentioned. The odd diction. You see, the Rexorians have only a vague knowledge of human beings. A sort of ideal abstraction, taken from Terran objects that have found their way to Rexor. Books mostly. Secondary data like that. The Rexorian idea of Terra is based on centuries-old Terran literature. Romantic novels from our past. Language, customs, manners from old Terran books. That accounts for the

strange archaic quality to it. It had studied Terra, all right. But in an indirect and misleading way." Frank grinned wryly. "The Rexorians are two hundred years behind the times — which is a break for us. That's how we're able to detect them."

"Is this sort of thing — common? Does it happen often? It seems unbelievable." Jill rubbed her forehead wearily. "Dreamlike. It's hard to realize that it's actually happened. I'm just beginning to understand what it means."

"The galaxy is full of alien life forms. Parasitic and destructive entities. Terran ethics don't extend to them. We have to guard constantly against this sort of thing. Lester went in unsuspectingly — and this thing ousted him and took over his body."

Frank glanced at his sister. Jill's face was expressionless. A stern little face, wide-eyed, but composed. She sat up straight, staring fixedly ahead, her small hands folded quietly in her lap.

"We can arrange it so you won't actually have to appear in court," Frank went on. "You can vid a statement and it'll be presented as evidence. I'm certain your statement will do. The Federal courts will help us all they can, but they have to have *some* evidence to go on."

Jill was silent.

"What do you say?" Frank asked.

"What happens after the court makes its decision?"

"Then we vibro-ray it. Destroy the Rexorian mind. A Terran patrol ship on Rexor IV sends out a party to locate the — er — original contents."

Jill gasped. She turned toward her brother in amazement. “You mean __”

“Oh, yes. Lester is alive. In suspension, somewhere on Rexor. In one of the old city ruins. We’ll have to force them to give him up. They won’t want to, but they’ll do it. They’ve done it before. Then he’ll be back with you. Safe and sound. Just like before. And this horrible nightmare you’ve been living will be a thing of the past.”

“I see.”

“Here we are.” The cruiser pulled to a halt before the imposing Federal Clearance Building. Frank got quickly out, holding the door for his sister. Jill stepped down slowly. “Okay?” Frank said.

“Okay.”

When they entered the building, Clearance agents led them through the check screens, down the long corridors. Jill’s high heels echoed in the ominous silence.

“Quite a place,” Frank observed.

“It’s unfriendly.”

“Consider it a glorified police station.” Frank halted. Before them was a guarded door. “Here we are.”

“Wait.” Jill pulled back, her face twisting in panic. “I —”

“We’ll wait until you’re ready.” Frank signaled to the Clearance agent to leave. “I understand. It’s a bad business.”

Jill stood for a moment, her head down. She took a deep breath, her small fists clenched. Her chin came up, level and steady. “All right.”

“You ready?”

“Yes.”

Frank opened the door. “Here we are.”

Director Douglas and the three Clearance agents turned expectantly as Jill and Frank entered. “Good,” Douglas murmured, with relief. “I was beginning to get worried.”

The sitting man got slowly to his feet, picking up his coat. He gripped his ivory-headed cane tightly, his hands tense. He said nothing. He watched silently as the woman entered the room, Frank behind her. “This is Mrs Herrick,” Frank said. “Jill, this is Clearance Director Douglas.”

“I’ve heard of you,” Jill said faintly.

“Then you know our work.”

“Yes. I know your work.”

“This is an unfortunate business. It’s happened before. I don’t know what Frank has told you —”

“He explained the situation.”

“Good.” Douglas was relieved. “I’m glad of that. It’s not easy to explain. You understand, then, what we want. The previous cases were caught in deep space. We vibro-tubed them and got the original contents back. But this time we must work through legal channels.” Douglas picked up a vidtape recorder. “We will need your statement, Mrs Herrick. Since no physical change has occurred we’ll have no direct evidence to make our

case. We'll have only your testimony of character alteration to present to the court."

He held the vidtape recorder out. Jill took it slowly.

"Your statement will undoubtedly be accepted by the court. The court will give us the release we want and then we can go ahead. If everything goes correctly we hope to be able to set things exactly as they were before."

Jill was gazing silently at the man standing in the corner with his coat and ivory-headed cane. "Before?" she said. "What do you mean?"

"Before the change."

Jill turned toward Director Douglas. Calmly, she laid the vidtape recorder down on the table. "What change are you talking about?"

Douglas paled. He licked his lips. All eyes in the room were on Jill. "The change in *him."* He pointed at the man.

"Jill!" Frank barked. "What's the matter with you?" He came quickly toward her. "What the hell are you doing? You know damn well what change we mean!"

"That's odd," Jill said thoughtfully. "I haven't noticed any change."

Frank and Director Douglas looked at each other. "I don't get it," Frank muttered, dazed.

"Mrs Herrick —" Douglas began.

Jill walked over to the man standing quietly in the corner. "Can we go now, dear?" she asked. She took his arm. "Or is there some reason why my husband has to stay here?"

The man and woman walked silently along the dark street.

“Come on,” Jill said. “Let’s go home.”

The man glanced at her. “It’s a nice afternoon,” he said. He took a deep breath, filling his lungs. “Spring is coming — I think. Isn’t it?”

Jill nodded.

“I wasn’t sure. It’s a nice smell. Plants and soil and growing things.”

“Yes.”

“Are we going to walk? Is it far?”

“Not too far.”

The man gazed at her intently, a serious expression on his face. “I am very indebted to you, my dear,” he said.

Jill nodded.

“I wish to thank you. I must admit I did not expect such a —”

Jill turned abruptly. “What is your name? Your *real* name.”

The man’s gray eyes flickered. He smiled a little, a kind, gentle smile. “I’m afraid you would not be able to pronounce it. The sounds cannot be formed…”

Jill was silent as they walked along, deep in thought. The city lights were coming on all around them. Bright yellow spots in the gloom. “What are you thinking?” the man asked.

“I was thinking perhaps I will still call you Lester,” Jill said. “If you don’t mind.”

“I don’t mind,” the man said. He put his arm around her, drawing her close to him. He gazed down tenderly as they walked through the thickening darkness, between the yellow candles of light that marked the way. “Anything you wish. Whatever will make you happy.”

Adjustment Team

It was bright morning. The sun shone down on the damp lawns and sidewalks, reflecting off the sparkling parked cars. The Clerk came walking hurriedly, leafing through his instructions, flipping pages and frowning. He stopped in front of the small green stucco house for a moment, and then turned up the walk, entering the back yard.

The dog was asleep inside his shed, his back turned to the world. Only his thick tail showed.

“For heaven’s sake,” the Clerk exclaimed, hands on his hips. He tapped his mechanical pencil noisily against his clipboard. “Wake up, you in there.”

The dog stirred. He came slowly out of his shed, head first, blinking and yawning in the morning sunlight. “Oh, it’s you. Already?” He yawned again.

“Big doings.” The Clerk ran his expert finger down the traffic-control sheet. “They’re adjusting Sector T137 this morning. Starting at exactly nine o’clock.” He glanced at his pocket watch. “Three hour alteration. Will finish by noon.”

“T137? That’s not far from here.”

The Clerk’s thin lips twisted with contempt. “Indeed. You’re showing astonishing perspicacity, my black-haired friend. Maybe you can divine why I’m here.”

“We overlap with T137.”

“Exactly. Elements from this Sector are involved. We must make sure they’re properly placed when the adjustment begins.” The Clerk glanced

toward the small green stucco house. “Your particular task concerns the man in there. He is employed by a business establishment lying within Sector T137. It’s essential that he be there before nine o’clock.”

The dog studied the house. The shades had been let up. The kitchen light was on. Beyond the lace curtains dim shapes could be seen, stirring around the table. A man and woman. They were drinking coffee.

“There they are,” the dog murmured. “The man, you say? He’s not going to be harmed, is he?”

“Of course not. But he must be at his office early. Usually he doesn’t leave until after nine. Today he must leave at eight-thirty. He must be within Sector T137 before the process begins, or he won’t be altered to coincide with the new adjustment.”

The dog sighed. “That means I have to summon.”

“Correct.” The Clerk checked his instruction sheet. “You’re to summon at precisely eight-fifteen. You’ve got that? Eight-fifteen. No later.”

“What will the eight-fifteen summons bring?”

The Clerk flipped open his instruction book, examining the code columns. “It will bring A Friend with a Car. To drive him to work early.” He closed the book and folded his arms, preparing to wait. “That way he’ll get to his office almost an hour ahead of time. Which is vital.”

“Vital,” the dog murmured. He lay down, half inside his shed. His eyes closed. “Vital.”

“Wake up! This must be done exactly on time. If you summon too soon or too late —”

The dog nodded sleepily. “I know. I’ll do it right. I *always* do it right.”

Ed Fletcher poured more cream in his coffee. He sighed, leaning back in his chair. Behind him the oven hissed softly, filling the kitchen with warm fumes. The yellow overhead light beamed down.

"Another roll?" Ruth asked.

"I'm full." Ed sipped his coffee. "You can have it."

"Have to go." Ruth got to her feet, unfastening her robe. Time to go to work."

"Already?"

"Sure. You lucky bum! Wish I could sit around." Ruth moved toward the bathroom, running her fingers through her long black hair. "When you work for the Government you start early."

"But you get off early," Ed pointed out. He unfolded the *Chronicle*, examining the sporting green. "Well, have a good time today. Don't type any wrong words, any double-entendres."

The bathroom door closed, as Ruth shed her robe and began dressing.

Ed yawned and glanced up at the clock over the sink. Plenty of time. Not even eight. He sipped more coffee and then rubbed his stubbled chin. He would have to shave. He shrugged lazily. Ten minutes, maybe.

Ruth came bustling out in her nylon slip, hurrying into the bedroom. "I'm late." She rushed rapidly around, getting into her blouse and skirt, her stockings, her little white shoes. Finally she bent over and kissed him. "Goodbye, honey. I'll do the shopping tonight."

“Goodbye.” Ed lowered his newspaper and put his arm around his wife’s trim waist, hugging her affectionately. “You smell nice. Don’t flirt with the boss.”

Ruth ran out the front door, clattering down the steps. He heard the click of her heels diminish down the sidewalk.

She was gone. The house was silent. He was alone.

Ed got to his feet, pushing his chair back. He wandered lazily into the bathroom, and got his razor down. Eight-ten. He washed his face, rubbing it down with shaving cream, and began to shave. He shaved leisurely. He had plenty of time.

The Clerk bent over his round pocket watch, licking his lips nervously. Sweat stood out on his forehead. The second hand ticked on. Eight-fourteen. Almost time.

“Get ready!” the Clerk snapped. He tensed, his small body rigid. “Ten seconds to go!”

“Time!” the Clerk cried out.

Nothing happened.

The Clerk turned, eyes wide with horror. From the little shed a thick black tail showed. The dog had gone back to sleep.

“TIME!” the Clerk shrieked. He kicked wildly at the furry rump. “In the name of God —”

The dog stirred. He thumped around hastily, backing out of the shed. “My goodness.” Embarrassed, he made his way quickly to the fence. Standing up on his hind paws, he opened his mouth wide. “Woof!” he

summoned. He glanced apologetically at the Clerk. “I beg your pardon. I can’t understand how —”

The Clerk gazed fixedly down at his watch. Cold terror knotted his stomach. The hands showed eight-sixteen. “You failed,” he grated. “You failed! You miserable flea-bitten ragbag of a wornout old mutt! You failed!”

The dog dropped and came anxiously back. “I failed, you say? You mean the summons time was —?”

“You summoned too late.” The Clerk put his watch away slowly, a glazed expression on his face. “You summoned too late. We won’t get A Friend with a Car. There’s no telling what will come instead. I’m afraid to see what eight-sixteen brings.”

“I hope he’ll be in Sector T137 in time.”

“He won’t,” the Clerk wailed. “He won’t be there. We’ve made a mistake. We’ve made things go wrong!”

Ed was rinsing the shaving cream from his face when the muffled sound of the dog’s bark echoed through the silent house.

“Damn,” Ed muttered. “Wake up the whole block.” He dried his face, listening. Was somebody coming?

A vibration. Then —

The doorbell rang.

Ed came out of the bathroom. Who could it be? Had Ruth forgotten something? He tossed on a white shirt and opened the front door.

A bright young man, face bland and eager, beamed happily at him. “Good morning, sir.” He tipped his hat. “I’m sorry to bother you so early —”

“What do you want?”

“I’m from the Federal Life Insurance Company. I’m here to see you about —”

Ed pushed the door closed. “Don’t want any. I’m in a rush. Have to get to work.”

“Your wife said this was the only time I could catch you.” The young man picked up his briefcase, easing the door open again. “She especially asked me to come this early. We don’t usually begin our work at this time, but since she asked me, I made a special note about it.”

“Okay.” Sighing wearily, Ed admitted the young man. “You can explain your policy while I get dressed.”

The young man opened his briefcase on the couch, laying out heaps of pamphlets and illustrated folders. “I’d like to show you some of these figures, if I may. It’s of great importance to you and your family to —”

Ed found himself sitting down, going over the pamphlets. He purchased a ten-thousand-dollar policy on his own life and then eased the young man out. He looked at the clock. Practically nine-thirty!

“Damn.” He’d be late to work. He finished fastening his tie, grabbed his coat, turned off the oven and the lights, dumped the dishes in the sink, and ran out on the porch.

As he hurried toward the bus stop he was cursing inwardly. Life insurance salesmen. Why did the jerk have to come just as he was getting ready to leave?

Ed groaned. No telling what the consequences would be, getting to the office late. He wouldn’t get there until almost ten. He set himself in

anticipation. A sixth sense told him he was in for it. Something bad. It was the wrong day to be late.

If only the salesman hadn't come.

Ed hopped off the bus a block from his office. He began walking rapidly. The huge clock in front of Stein's Jewelry Store told him it was almost ten.

His heart sank. Old Douglas would give him hell for sure. He could see it now. Douglas puffing and blowing, red-faced, waving his thick finger at him; Miss Evans, smiling behind her typewriter; Jackie, the office boy, grinning and snickering; Earl Hendricks; Joe and Tom; Mary, dark-eyed, full bosom and long lashes. All of them, kidding him the whole rest of the day.

He came to the corner and stopped for the light. On the other side of the street rose a big white concrete building, the towering column of steel and cement, girders and glass windows — the office building. Ed flinched. Maybe he could say the elevator got stuck. Somewhere between the second and third floor.

The street light changed. Nobody else was crossing. Ed crossed alone. He hopped up on the curb on the far side —

And stopped, rigid.

The sun had winked off. One moment it was beaming down. Then it was gone. Ed looked up sharply. Gray clouds swirled above him. Huge, formless clouds. Nothing more. An ominous, thick haze that made everything waver and dim. Uneasy chills plucked at him. *What was it?*

He advanced cautiously, feeling his way through the mist. Everything was silent. No sounds — not even the traffic sounds. Ed peered frantically around, trying to see through the rolling haze. No people. No cars. No sun. Nothing.

The office building loomed up ahead, ghostly. It was an indistinct gray. He put out his hand uncertainly —

A section of the building fell away. It rained down, a torrent of particles. Like sand. Ed gaped foolishly. A cascade of gray debris, spilling around his feet. And where he had touched the building, a jagged cavity yawned — an ugly pit marring the concrete.

Dazed, he made his way to the front steps. He mounted them. The steps gave way underfoot. His feet sank down. He was wading through shifting sand, weak, rotted stuff that broke under his weight.

He got into the lobby. The lobby was dim and obscure. The overhead lights flickered feebly in the gloom. An unearthly pall hung over everything.

He spied the cigar stand. The seller leaned silently, resting on the counter, toothpick between his teeth, his face vacant. *And gray.* He was gray all over.

“Hey,” Ed croaked. “What’s going on?”

The seller did not answer. Ed reached out toward him. His hand touched the seller’s gray arm — and passed right through.

“Good God,” Ed said.

The seller’s arm came loose. It fell to the lobby floor, disintegrating into fragments. Bits of gray fiber. Like dust. Ed’s senses reeled.

“Help!” he shouted, finding his voice.

No answer. He peered around. A few shapes stood here and there: a man reading a newspaper, two women waiting at the elevator.

Ed made his way over to the man. He reached out and touched him.

The man slowly collapsed. He settled into a heap, a loose pile of gray ash. Dust. Particles. The two women dissolved when he touched them. Silently. They made no sound as they broke apart.

Ed found the stairs. He grabbed hold of the banister and climbed. The stairs collapsed under him. He hurried faster. Behind him lay a broken path — his footprints clearly visible in the concrete. Clouds of ash blew around him as he reached the second floor.

He gazed down the silent corridor. He saw more clouds of ash. He heard no sound. There was just darkness — rolling darkness.

He climbed unsteadily to the third floor. Once, his shoe broke completely through the stair. For a sickening second he hung, poised over a yawning hole that looked down into a bottomless nothing.

Then he climbed on, and emerged in front of his own office:

DOUGLAS AND BLAKE, REAL ESTATE.

The hall was dim, gloomy with clouds of ash. The overhead lights flickered fitfully. He reached for the door handle. The handle came off in his hand. He dropped it and dug his fingernails into the door. The plate glass crashed past him, breaking into bits. He tore the door open and stepped over it, into the office.

Miss Evans sat at her typewriter, fingers resting quietly on the keys. She did not move. She was gray, her hair, her skin, her clothing. She was without color. Ed touched her. His fingers went through her shoulder, into dry flakiness.

He drew back, sickened. Miss Evans did not stir.

He moved on. He pushed against a desk. The desk collapsed into rotting dust. Earl Hendricks stood by the water cooler, a cup in his hand. He was a gray statue, unmoving. Nothing stirred. No sound. No life. The whole office was gray dust — without life or motion.

Ed found himself out in the corridor again. He shook his head, dazed. What did it mean? Was he going out of his mind? Was he — ?

A sound.

Ed turned, peering into the gray mist. A creature was coming, hurrying rapidly. A man — a man in a white robe. Behind him others came. Men in white, with equipment. They were lugging complex machinery.

“Hey —” Ed gasped weakly.

The men stopped. Their mouths opened. Their eyes popped.

“Look!”

“Something’s gone wrong!”

“One still charged.”

“Get the de-energizer.”

“We can’t proceed until —”

The men came toward Ed, moving around him. One lugged a long hose with some sort of nozzle. A portable cart came wheeling up. Instructions were rapidly shouted.

Ed broke out of his paralysis. Fear swept over him. Panic. Something hideous was happening. He had to get out. Warn people. Get away.

He turned and ran, back down the stairs. The stairs collapsed under him. He fell half a flight, rolling in heaps of dry ash. He got to his feet and hurried on, down to the ground floor.

The lobby was lost in the clouds of gray ash. He pushed blindly through, toward the door. Behind him, the white-clad men were coming, dragging their equipment and shouting to each other, hurrying quickly after him.

He reached the sidewalk. Behind him the office building wavered and sagged, sinking to one side, torrents of ash raining down in heaps. He raced toward the corner, the men just behind him. Gray cloud swirled around him. He groped his way across the street, hands outstretched. He gained the opposite curb —

The sun winked on. Warm yellow sunlight streamed down on him. Cars honked. Traffic lights changed. On all sides men and women in bright spring clothes hurried and pushed: shoppers, a blue-clad cop, salesmen with briefcases. Stores, windows, signs… noisy cars moving up and down the street…

And oyerhead was the bright sun and familiar blue sky.

Ed halted, gasping for breath. He turned and looked back the way he had come. Across the street was the office building — as it had always been. Firm and distinct. Concrete and glass and steel.

He stepped back a pace and collided with a hurrying citizen. “Hey,” the man grunted. “Watch it.”

“Sorry.” Ed shook his head, trying to clear it. From where he stood, the office building looked like always, big and solemn and substantial, rising up imposingly on the other side of the street.

But a minute ago —

Maybe he was out of his mind. He had seen the building crumbling into dust. Building — and people. They had fallen into gray clouds of dust. And the men in white — they had chased him. Men in white robes, shouting orders, wheeling complex equipment.

He was out of his mind. There was no other explanation. Weakly, Ed turned and stumbled along the sidewalk, his mind reeling. He moved blindly, without purpose, lost in a haze of confusion and terror.

The Clerk was brought into the top-level Administrative chambers and told to wait.

He paced back and forth nervously, clasping and wringing his hands in an agony of apprehension. He took off his glasses and wiped them shakily.

Lord. All the trouble and grief. And it wasn't his fault. But he would have to take the rap. It was his responsibility to get the Summoners routed out and their instructions followed. The miserable flea-infested Summoner had gone back to sleep — and *he* would have to answer for it.

The doors opened. "All right," a voice murmured, preoccupied. It was a tired, care-worn voice. The Clerk trembled and entered slowly, sweat dripping down his neck and into his celluloid collar.

The Old Man glanced up, laying aside his book. He studied the Clerk calmly, his faded blue eyes mild — a deep, ancient mildness that made the Clerk tremble even more. He took out his handkerchief and mopped his brow.

"I understand there was a mistake," the Old Man murmured. "In connection with Sector T137. Something to do with an element from an adjoining area."

"That's right." The Clerk's voice was faint and husky. "Very unfortunate."

“What exactly occurred?”

“I started out this morning with my instruction sheets. The material relating to T137 had top priority, of course. I served notice on the Summoner in my area that an eight-fifteen summons was required.”

“Did the Summoner understand the urgency?”

“Yes, sir.” The Clerk hesitated. “But —”

“But what?”

The Clerk twisted miserably. “While my back was turned the Summoner crawled back in his shed and went to sleep. I was occupied, checking the exact time with my watch. I called the moment — but there was no response.”

“You called at eight-fifteen exactly?”

“Yes, sir! Exactly eight-fifteen. But the Summoner was asleep. By the time I managed to arouse him it was eight-*sixteen.* He summoned, but instead of A Friend with a Car we got — A Life Insurance Salesman.” The Clerk’s face screwed up with disgust. “The Salesman kept the element there until almost nine-thirty. Therefore he was late to work instead of early.”

For a moment the Old Man was silent. “Then the element was not within T137 when the adjustment began.”

“No. He arrived about ten o’clock.”

“During the middle of the adjustment.” The Old Man got to his feet and paced slowly back and forth, face grim, hands behind his back. His long robe flowed out behind him. “A serious matter. During a Sector Adjustment

all related elements from other Sectors must be included. Otherwise, their orientations remain out of phase. When this element entered T137 the adjustment had been in progress fifty minutes. The element encountered the Sector at its most de-energized stage. He wandered about until one of the adjustment teams met him."

"Did they catch him?"

"Unfortunately, no. He fled, out of the Sector. Into a nearby fully energized area."

"What — what then?"

The Old Man stopped pacing, his lined face grim. He ran a heavy hand through his long white hair. "We do not know. We lost contact with him. We will reestablish contact soon, of course. But for the moment he is out of control."

"What are you going to do?"

"He must be contacted and contained. He must be brought up here. There's no other solution."

"Up *here!"*

"It is too late to de-energize him. By the time he is regained he will have told others. To wipe his mind clean would only complicate matters. Usual methods will not suffice. I must deal with this problem myself."

"I hope he's located quickly," the Clerk said.

"He will be. Every Watcher is alerted. Every Watcher and every Summoner." The Old Man's eyes twinkled. "Even the Clerks, although we hesitate to count on them."

The Clerk flushed. “I’ll be glad when this thing is over,” he muttered.

Ruth came tripping down the stairs and out of the building, into the hot noonday sun. She lit a cigarette and hurried along the walk, her small bosom rising and falling as she breathed in the spring air.

“Ruth.” Ed stepped up behind her.

“Ed!” She spun, gasping in astonishment. “What are you doing away from — ?”

“Come on.” Ed grabbed her arm, pulling her along. “Let’s keep moving.”

“But what — ?”

“I’ll tell you later.” Ed’s face was pale and grim. “Let’s go where we can talk. In private.”

“I was going down to have lunch at Louie’s. We can talk there.” Ruth hurried along breathlessly. “What is it? What’s happened? You look so strange. And why aren’t you at work? Did you — did you get fired?”

They crossed the street and entered a small restaurant. Men and women milled around, getting their lunch. Ed found a table in the back, secluded in a corner. “Here.” He sat down abruptly. “This will do.” She slid into the other chair.

Ed ordered a cup of coffee. Ruth had salad and creamed tuna on toast, coffee and peach pie. Silently, Ed watched her as she ate, his face dark and moody.

“Please tell me,” Ruth begged him.

“You really want to know?”

“Of course I want to know!” Ruth put her small hand anxiously on his. “I’m your wife.”

“Something happened today. This morning. I was late to work. A damn insurance man came by and held me up. I was half an hour late.”

Ruth caught her breath. “Douglas fired you.”

“No.” Ed ripped a paper napkin slowly into bits. He stuffed the bits in the half-empty water glass. “I was worried as hell. I got off the bus and hurried down the street. I noticed it when I stepped up on the curb in front of the office.”

“Noticed what?”

Ed told her. The whole works. Everything.

When he had finished, Ruth sat back, her face white, hands trembling. “I see,” she murmured. “No wonder you’re upset.” She drank a little cold coffee, the cup rattling against the saucer. “What a terrible thing.”

Ed leaned intently toward his wife. “Ruth. Do you think I’m going crazy?”

Ruth’s red lips twisted. “I don’t know what to say. It’s so strange…”

“Yeah. Strange is hardly the word for it. I poked my hands right through them. Like they were clay. Old dry clay. Dust. Dust figures.” Ed lit a cigarette from Ruth’s pack. “When I got out I looked back and there it was. The office building. Like always.”

“You were afraid Mr Douglas would bawl you out, weren’t you?”

“Sure. I was afraid — and guilty.” Ed’s eyes flickered. “I know what you’re thinking. I was late and I couldn’t face him. So I had some sort of protective psychotic fit. Retreat from reality.” He stubbed the cigarette out savagely. “Ruth, I’ve been wandering around town since. Two and a half hours. Sure, I’m afraid. I’m afraid like hell to go back.”

“Of Douglas?”

“No! The men in white.” Ed shuddered. “God. Chasing me. With their damn hoses and — and equipment.”

Ruth was silent. Finally she looked up at her husband, her dark eyes bright. “You have to go back, Ed.”

“Back? Why?”

“To prove something.”

“Prove what?”

“Prove it’s all right.” Ruth’s hand pressed against his. “You have to, Ed. You have to go back and face it. To show yourself there’s nothing to be afraid of.”

“The hell with it! After what I saw? Listen, Ruth. I saw the fabric of reality split open. I saw — *behind.* Underneath. I saw what was really there. And I don’t want to go back. I don’t want to see dust people again. Ever.”

Ruth’s eyes were fixed intently on him. “I’ll go back with you,” she said.

“For God’s sake.”

“For *your* sake. For your sanity. So you’ll know.” Ruth got abruptly to her feet, pulling her coat around her. “Come on, Ed. I’ll go with you. We’ll

go up there together. To the office of Douglas and Blake, Real Estate. I'll even go in with you to see Mr Douglas."

Ed got up slowly, staring hard at his wife. "You think I blacked out. Cold feet. Couldn't face the boss." His voice was low and strained. "Don't you?"

Ruth was already threading her way toward the cashier. "Come on. You'll see. It'll all be there. Just like it was."

"Okay," Ed said. He followed her slowly. "We'll go back there — and see which of us is right."

They crossed the street together, Ruth holding on tight to Ed's arm. Ahead of them was the building, the towering structure of concrete and metal and glass.

"There it is," Ruth said. "See?"

There it was, all right. The big building rose up, firm and solid, glittering in the early afternoon sun, its windows sparkling brightly.

Ed and Ruth stepped up onto the curb. Ed tensed himself, his body rigid. He winced as his foot touched the pavement —

But nothing happened: the street noises continued; cars, people hurrying past; a kid selling papers. There were sounds, smells, the noise of a city in the middle of the day. And overhead was the sun and the bright blue sky.

"See?" Ruth said. "I was right."

They walked up the front steps, into the lobby. Behind the cigar stand the seller stood, arms folded, listening to the ball game. "Hi, Mr Fletcher," he called to Ed. His face lit up good-naturedly. "Who's the dame? Your wife know about this?"

Ed laughed unsteadily. They passed on toward the elevator. Four or five businessmen stood waiting. They were middle-aged men, well dressed, waiting impatiently in a bunch. “Hey, Fletcher,” one said. “Where you been all day? Douglas is yelling his head off.”

“Hello, Earl,” Ed muttered. He gripped Ruth’s arm. “Been a little sick.”

The elevator came. They got in. The elevator rose. “Hi, Ed,” the elevator operator said. “Who’s the good-looking gal? Why don’t you introduce her around?”

Ed grinned mechanically. “My wife.”

The elevator let them off at the third floor. Ed and Ruth got out, heading toward the glass door of Douglas and Blake, Real Estate.

Ed halted, breathing shallowly. “Wait.” He licked his lips. “I —”

Ruth waited calmly as Ed wiped his forehead and neck with his handkerchief. “All right now?”

“Yeah.” Ed moved forward. He pulled open the glass door.

Miss Evans glanced up, ceasing her typing. “Ed Fletcher! Where on earth have you been?”

“I’ve been sick. Hello, Tom.”

Tom glanced up from his work. “Hi, Ed. Say, Douglas is yelling for your scalp. Where have you been?”

“I know.” Ed turned wearily to Ruth. “I guess I better go in and face the music.”

Ruth .squeezed his arm. “You’ll be all right. I know.” She smiled, a relieved flash of white teeth and red lips. “Okay? Call me if you need me.”

“Sure.” Ed kissed her briefly on the mouth. “Thanks, honey. Thanks a lot. I don’t know what the hell went wrong with me. I guess it’s over.”

“Forget it. So long.” Ruth skipped back out of the office, the door closing after her. Ed listened to her race down the hall to the elevator.

“Nice little gal,” Jackie said appreciatively.

“Yeah.” Ed nodded, straightening his necktie. He moved unhappily toward the inner office, steeling himself. Well, he had to face it. Ruth was right. But he was going to have a hell of a time explaining it to the boss. He could see Douglas now, thick red wattles, big bull roar, face distorted with rage —

Ed stopped abruptly at the entrance to the inner office. He froze rigid. The inner office — it was *changed.*

The hackles of his neck rose. Cold fear gripped him, clutching at his windpipe. The inner office was different. He turned his head slowly, taking in the sight: the desks, chairs, fixtures, file cabinets, pictures.

Changes. Little changes. Subtle. Ed closed his eyes and opened them slowly. He was alert, breathing rapidly, his pulse racing. It was changed, all right. No doubt about it.

“What’s the matter, Ed?” Tom asked. The staff watched him curiously, pausing in their work.

Ed said nothing. He advanced slowly into the inner office. The office had been *gone over.* He could tell. Things had been altered. Rearranged. Nothing obvious — nothing he could put his finger on. But he could tell.

Joe Kent greeted him uneasily. “What’s the matter, Ed? You look like a wild dog. Is something — ?”

Ed studied Joe. He was different. Not the same. What was it?

Joe’s face. It was a little fuller. His shirt was blue-striped. Joe never wore blue stripes. Ed examined Joe’s desk. He saw papers and accounts. The desk — it was too far to the right. And it was bigger. It wasn’t the same desk.

The picture on the wall. It wasn’t the same. It was a different picture entirely. And the things on top of the file cabinet — some were new, others were gone.

He looked back through the door. Now that he thought about it, Miss Evans’ hair was different, done a different way. And it was lighter.

In here, Mary, filing her nails, over by the window — she was taller, fuller. Her purse, lying on the desk in front of her — a red purse, red knit.

“You always… have that purse?” Ed demanded.

Mary glanced up. “What?”

“That purse. You always have that?”

Mary laughed. She smoothed her skirt coyly around her shapely thighs, her long lashes blinking modestly. “Why, Mr Fletcher. What do you mean?”

Ed turned away. *He knew.* Even if she didn’t. She had been redone — changed: her purse, her clothes, her figure, everything about her. None of them knew — but him. His mind spun dizzily. They were all changed. All of them were different. They had all been remolded, recast. Subtly — but it was there.

The wastebasket. It was smaller, not the same. The window shades — white, not ivory. The wallpaper was not the same pattern. The lighting fixtures …

Endless, subtle changes.

Ed made his way back to the inner office. He lifted his hand and knocked on Douglas's door.

"Come in."

Ed pushed the door open. Nathan Douglas looked up impatiently. "Mr Douglas —" Ed began. He came into the room unsteadily — and stopped.

Douglas was not the same. Not at all. His whole office was changed: the rugs, the drapes. The desk was oak, not mahogany. And Douglas himself …

Douglas was younger, thinner. His hair, brown. His skin not so red. His face smoother. No wrinkles. Chin reshaped. Eyes green, not black. He was a different man. But still Douglas — a different Douglas. A different version!

"What is it?" Douglas demanded impatiently. "Oh, it's you, Fletcher. Where were you this morning?"

Ed backed out. Fast.

He slammed the door and hurried through the inner office. Tom and Miss Evans glanced up, startled. Ed passed them by, grabbing the hall door open.

"Hey!" Tom called. "What — ?"

Ed hurried down the hall. Terror leaped through him. He had to hurry. He had *seen.* There wasn't much time. He came to the elevator and stabbed

the button.

No time.

He ran to the stairs and started down. He reached the second floor. His terror grew. It was a matter of seconds.

Seconds!

The public phone. Ed ran into the phone booth. He dragged the door shut after him. Wildly, he dropped a dime in the slot and dialed. He had to call the police. He held the receiver to his ear, his heart pounding.

Warn them. Changes. Somebody tampering with reality. Altering it. He had been right. The white-clad men … their equipment… going through the building.

“Hello!” Ed shouted hoarsely. There was no answer. No hum. Nothing.

Ed peered frantically out the door.

And he sagged, defeated. Slowly he hung up the telephone receiver.

He was no longer on the second floor. The phone booth was rising, leaving the second floor behind, carrying him up, faster and faster. It rose floor by floor, moving silently, swiftly.

The phone booth passed through the ceiling of the building and out into the bright sunlight. It gained speed. The ground fell away below. Buildings and streets were getting smaller each moment. Tiny specks hurried along, far below, cars and people, dwindling rapidly.

Clouds drifted between him and the earth. Ed shut his eyes, dizzy with fright. He held on desperately to the door handles of the phone booth.

Faster and faster the phone booth climbed. The earth was rapidly being left behind, far below.

Ed peered up wildly. *Where?* Where was he going? Where was it taking him?

He stood gripping the door handles, waiting.

The Clerk nodded curtly. “That’s him, all right. The element in question.”

Ed Fletcher looked around him. He was in a huge chamber. The edges fell away into indistinct shadows. In front of him stood a man with notes and ledgers under his arm, peering at him through steel-rimmed glasses. He was a nervous little man, sharp-eyed, with celluloid collar, blue serge suit, vest, watch chain. He wore black shiny shoes.

And beyond him —

An old man sat quietly, in an immense modern chair. He watched Fletcher calmly, his blue eyes mild and tired. A strange thrill shot through Fletcher. It was not fear. Rather it was a vibration, rattling his bones — a deep sense of awe, tinged with fascination.

“Where — what is this place?” he asked faintly. He was still dazed from his quick ascent.

“Don’t ask questions!” The nervous little man snapped angrily, tapping his pencil against his ledgers. “You’re here to answer, not ask.”

The Old Man moved a little. He raised his hand. “I will speak to the element alone,” he murmured. His voice was low. It vibrated and rumbled through the chamber. Again the wave of fascinated awe swept Ed.

“Alone?” The little fellow backed away, gathering his books and papers in his arms. “Of course.” He glanced hostilely at Ed Fletcher. “I’m glad he’s

finally in custody. All the work and trouble just for —”

He disappeared through a door. The door closed softly behind him. Ed and the Old Man were alone.

“Please sit down,” the Old Man said.

Ed found a seat. He sat down awkwardly, nervously. He got out his cigarettes and then put them away again.

“What’s wrong?” the Old Man asked.

“I’m just beginning to understand.”

“Understand what?”

“That I’m dead.”

The Old Man smiled briefly. “Dead? No, you’re not dead. You’re… visiting. An unusual event, but necessitated by circumstances.” He leaned toward Ed. “Mr Fletcher, you have got yourself involved with something.”

“Yeah,” Ed agreed. “I wish I knew what it was. Or how it happened.”

“It was not your fault. You were a victim of a clerical error. A mistake was made — not by you. But involving you.”

“What mistake?” Ed rubbed his forehead wearily. “I — I got in on something. I saw *through.* I saw something I wasn’t supposed to see.”

The Old Man nodded. “That’s right. You saw something you were not supposed to see — something few elements have been aware of, let alone witnessed.”

“Elements?”

“An official term. Let it pass. A mistake was made, but we hope to rectify it. It is my hope that —”

“Those people,” Ed interrupted. “Heaps of dry ash. And gray. Like they were dead. Only it was everything: the stairs and walls and floor. No color or life.”

“That Sector had been temporarily de-energized. So the adjustment team could enter and effect changes.”

“Changes.” Ed nodded. “That’s right. When I went back later, everything was alive again. But not the same. It was all different.”

“The adjustment was complete by noon. The team finished its work and re-energized the Sector.”

“I see,” Ed muttered.

“You were supposed to have been in the Sector when the adjustment began. Because of an error you were not. You came into the Sector late — during the adjustment itself. You fled, and when you returned it was over. You saw, and you should not have seen. Instead of a witness you should have been part of the adjustment. Like the others, you should have undergone changes.”

Sweat came out on Ed Fletcher’s head. He wiped it away. His stomach turned over. Weakly, he cleared his throat. “I get the picture.” His voice was almost inaudible. A chilling premonition moved through him. “I was supposed to be changed like the others. But I guess something went wrong.”

“Something went wrong. An error occurred. And now a serious problem exists. You have seen these things. You know a great deal. And you are not coordinated with the new configuration.”

“Gosh,” Ed muttered. “Well, I won’t tell anybody.” Cold sweat poured off him. “You can count on that. I’m as good as changed.”

“You have already told someone,” the Old Man said coldly.

“Me?” Ed blinked. “Who?”

“Your wife.”

Ed trembled. The color drained from his face, leaving it a sickly white. “That’s right. I did.”

“Your wife knows.” The Old Man’s face twisted angrily. “A woman. Of all the things to tell —”

“I didn’t know.” Ed retreated, panic leaping through him. “But I know *now.* You can count on me. Consider me changed.”

The ancient blue eyes bored keenly into him, peering far into his depths. “And you were going to call the police. You wanted to inform the authorities.”

“But I didn’t know *who* was doing the changing.”

“Now you know. The natural process must be supplemented — adjusted here and there. Corrections must be made. We are fully licensed to make such corrections. Our adjustment teams perform vital work.”

Ed plucked up a measure of courage. “This particular adjustment. Douglas. The office. What was it for? I’m sure it was some worthwhile purpose.”

The Old Man waved his hand. Behind him in the shadows an immense map glowed into existence. Ed caught his breath. The edges of the map

faded off in obscurity. He saw an infinite web of detailed sections, a network of squares and ruled lines. Each square was marked. Some glowed with a blue light. The lights altered constantly.

"The Sector Board," the Old Man said. He sighed wearily. "A staggering job. Sometimes we wonder how we can go on another period. But it must be done. For the good of all. For *your good."*

"The change. In our — our Sector."

"Your office deals in real estate. The old Douglas was a shrewd man, but rapidly becoming infirm. His physical health was waning. In a few days Douglas will be offered a chance to purchase a large unimproved forest area in western Canada. It will require most of his assets. The older, less virile Douglas would have hesitated. It is imperative he not hesitate. He must purchase the area and clear the land at once. Only a younger man — a younger Douglas — would undertake this.

"When the land is cleared, certain anthropological remains will be discovered. They have already been placed there. Douglas will lease his land to the Canadian Government for scientific study. The remains found there will cause international excitement in learned circles.

"A chain of events will be set in motion. Men from numerous countries will come to Canada to examine the remains. Soviet, Polish, and Czech scientists will make the journey.

"The chain of events will draw these scientists together for the first time in years. National research will be temporarily forgotten in the excitement of these nonnational discoveries. One of the leading Soviet scientists will make friends with a Belgian scientist. Before they depart they will agree to correspond — without the knowledge of their governments, of course.

"The circle will widen. Other scientists on both sides will be drawn in. A society will be founded. More and more educated men will transfer an increasing amount of time to this international society. Purely national

research will suffer a slight but extremely critical eclipse. The war tension will somewhat wane.

"This alteration is vital. And it is dependent on the purchase and clearing of the section of wilderness in Canada. The old Douglas would not have dared take the risk. But the altered Douglas, and his altered, more youthful staff, will pursue this work with wholehearted enthusiasm. And from this, the vital chain of widening events will come about. The beneficiaries will be *you*. Our methods may seem strange and indirect. Even incomprehensible. But I assure you we know what we're doing."

"I know that now," Ed said.

"So you do. You know a great deal. Much too much. No element should possess such knowledge. I should perhaps call an adjustment team in here…"

A picture formed in Ed's mind: swirling gray clouds, gray men and women. He shuddered. "Look," he croaked. "I'll do anything. Anything at all. Only don't de-energize me." Sweat ran down his face. "Okay?"

The Old Man pondered. "Perhaps some alternative could be found. There is another possibility."

"What?" Ed asked eagerly. "What is it?"

The Old Man spoke slowly, thoughtfully. "If I allow you to return, you will swear never to speak of the matter? Will you swear not to reveal to anyone the things you saw? The things you know?"

"Sure!" Ed gasped eagerly, blinding relief flooding over him. "I swear!"

"Your wife. She must know nothing more. She must think it was only a passing psychological fit — retreat from reality."

“She thinks that already.”

“She must continue to.”

Ed set his jaw firmly. “I’ll see that she continues to think it was a mental aberration. She’ll never know what really happened.”

“You are certain you can keep the truth from her?”

“Sure,” Ed said confidently. “I know I can.”

“All right.” The Old Man nodded slowly. “I will send you back. But you must tell no one.” He swelled visibly. “Remember: you will eventually come back to me — everyone does, in the end — and your fate will not be enviable.”

“I won’t tell her,” Ed said, sweating. “I promise. You have my word on that. I can handle Ruth. Don’t give it a second thought.”

Ed arrived home at sunset.

He blinked, dazed from the rapid descent. For a moment he stood on the pavement, regaining his balance and catching his breath. Then he walked quickly up the path.

He pushed the door open and entered the little green stucco house.

“Ed!” Ruth came flying, face distorted with tears. She threw her arms around him, hugging him tight. “Where the hell have you been?”

“Been?” Ed murmured. “At the office, of course.”

Ruth pulled back abruptly. “No, you haven’t.”

Vague tendrils of alarm plucked at Ed. “Of course I have. Where else —?”

“I called Douglas about three. He said you left. You walked out, practically as soon as I turned my back. Eddie —”

Ed patted her nervously. “Take it easy, honey.” He began unbuttoning his coat. “Everything’s okay. Understand? Things are perfectly all right.”

Ruth sat down on the arm of the couch. She blew her nose, dabbing at her eyes. “If you knew how much I’ve worried.” She put her handkerchief away and folded her arms. “I want to know where you were.”

Uneasily, Ed hung his coat in the closet. He came over and kissed her. Her lips were ice cold. “I’ll tell you all about it. But what do you say we have something to eat? I’m starved.”

Ruth studied him intently. She got down from the arm of the couch. “I’ll change and fix dinner.”

She hurried into the bedroom and slipped off her shoes and nylons. Ed followed her. “I didn’t mean to worry you,” he said carefully. “After you left me today I realized you were right.”

“Oh?” Ruth unfastened her blouse and skirt, arranging them over a hanger. “Right about what?”

“About me.” He manufactured a grin and made it glow across his face. “About… what happened.”

Ruth hung her slip over the hanger. She studied her husband intently as she struggled into her tight-fitting jeans. “Go on.”

The moment had come. It was now or never. Ed Fletcher braced himself and chose his words carefully. “I realized,” he stated, “that the whole darn

thing was in my mind. You were right, Ruth. Completely right. And I even realize what caused it."

Ruth rolled her cotton T-shirt down and tucked it in her jeans. "What was the cause?"

"Overwork."

"Overwork?"

"I need a vacation. I haven't had a vacation in years. My mind isn't on the job. I've been daydreaming." He said it firmly, but his heart was in his mouth. "I need to get away. To the mountains. Bass fishing. Or —" He searched his mind frantically. "Or —"

Ruth came toward him ominously. "Ed!" she said sharply. "Look at me!"

"What's the matter?" Panic shot through him. "Why are you looking at me like that?"

"*Where were you this afternoon?"*

Ed's grin faded. "I told you. I went for a walk. Didn't I tell you? A walk. To think things over."

"Don't lie to me, Eddie Fletcher! I can tell when you're lying!" Fresh tears welled up in Ruth's eyes. Her breasts rose and fell excitedly under her cotton shirt. "Admit it! You didn't go for a walk!"

Ed stammered weakly. Sweat poured off him. He sagged helplessly against the door. "What do you mean?"

Ruth's black eyes flashed with anger. "Come on! I want to know where you were! Tell me! I have a right to know. What really happened?"

Ed retreated in terror, his resolve melting like wax. It was going all wrong. “Honest. I went out for a —”

“Tell me!” Ruth’s sharp fingernails dug into his arm. “I want to know where you were — and who you were with!”

Ed opened his mouth. He tried to grin, but his face failed to respond. “I don’t know what you mean.”

“You know what I mean. Who were you with? Where did you go? Tell me! I’ll find out sooner or later.”

There was no way out. He was licked — and he knew it. He couldn’t keep it from her. Desperately he stalled, praying for time. If he could only distract her, get her mind on something else. If she would only let up, even for a second. He could invent something — a better story. Time — he needed more time. “Ruth, you’ve got to —”

Suddenly there was a sound: the bark of a dog, echoing through the dark house.

Ruth let go, cocking her head alertly. “That was Dobbie. I think somebody’s coming.”

The doorbell rang.

“You stay here. I’ll be right back.” Ruth ran out of the room, to the front door. “Darn it.” She pulled the front door open.

“Good evening!” The young man stepped quickly inside, loaded down with objects, grinning broadly at Ruth. “I’m from the Sweep-Rite Vacuum Cleaner Company.”

Ruth scowled impatiently. “Really, we’re about to sit down at the table.”

“Oh, this will only take a moment.” The young man set down the vacuum cleaner and its attachments with a metallic crash. Rapidly, he unrolled a long illustrated banner, showing the vacuum cleaner in action. “Now, if you’ll just hold this while I plug in the cleaner —”

He bustled happily about, unplugging the TV set, plugging in the cleaner, pushing the chairs out of his way.

Til show you the drape scraper first.” He attached a hose and nozzle to the big gleaming tank. “Now, if you’ll just sit down I’ll demonstrate each of these easy-to-use attachments.” His happy voice rose over the roar of the cleaner. “You’ll notice —”

Ed Fletcher sat down on the bed. He groped in his pocket until he found his cigarettes. Shakily he lit one and leaned back against the wall, weak with relief.

He gazed up, a look of gratitude on his face. “Thanks,” he said softly. “I think we’ll make it — after all. Thanks a lot.”

The Impossible Planet

“She just stands there,” Norton said nervously. “Captain, you’ll have to talk to her.”

“What does she want?”

“She wants a ticket. She’s stone deaf. She just stands there staring and she won’t go away. It gives me the creeps.”

Captain Andrews got slowly to his feet. “Okay. I’ll talk to her. Send her in.”

“Thanks.” To the corridor Norton said, “The Captain will talk to you. Come ahead.”

There was motion outside the control room. A flash of metal. Captain Andrews pushed his desk scanner back and stood waiting.

“In here.” Norton backed into the control room. “This way. Right in here.”

Behind Norton came a withered little old woman. Beside her moved a gleaming robant, a towering robot servant, supporting her with its arm. The robant and the tiny old woman entered the control room slowly.

“Here’s her papers.” Norton slid a folio onto the chart desk, his voice awed. “She’s three hundred and fifty years old. One of the oldest sustained. From Riga II.”

Andrews leafed slowly through the folio. In front of the desk the little woman stood silently, staring straight ahead. Her faded eyes were pale blue. Like ancient china.

“Irma Vincent Gordon,” Andrews murmured. He glanced up. “Is that right?”

The old woman did not answer.

“She is totally deaf, sir,” the robant said.

Andrews grunted and returned to the folio. Irma Gordon was one of the original settlers of the Riga system. Origin unknown. Probably born out in space in one of the old sub-C ships. A strange feeling drifted through him. The little old creature. The centuries she had seen! The changes.

“She wants to travel?” he asked the robant.

“Yes, sir. She has come from her home to purchase a ticket.”

“Can she stand space travel?”

“She came from Riga, here to Fomalhaut IX.”

“Where does she want to go?”

“To Earth, sir,” the robant said.

“Earth!” Andrews’ jaw dropped. He swore nervously. “What do you mean?”

“She wishes to travel to Earth, sir.”

“You see?” Norton muttered. “Completely crazy.”

Gripping his desk tightly, Andrews addressed the old woman. “Madam, we can’t sell you a ticket to Earth.”

“She can’t hear you, sir,” the robant said.

Andrews found a piece of paper. He wrote in big letters:

CAN’T SELL YOU A TICKET TO EARTH

He held it up. The old woman’s eyes moved as she studied the words. Her lips twitched. “Why not?” she said at last. Her voice was faint and dry. Like rustling weeds.

Andrews scratched an answer.

NO SUCH PLACE

He added grimly:

MYTH — LEGEND — NEVER EXISTED

The old woman’s faded eyes left the words. She gazed directly at Andrews, her face expressionless. Andrews became uneasy. Beside him, Norton sweated nervously.

“Jeez,” Norton muttered. “Get her out of here. She’ll put the hex on us.”

Andrews addressed the robant. “Can’t you make her understand? There is no such place as Earth. It’s been proved a thousand times. No such primordial planet existed. All scientists agree human life arose simultaneously throughout the —”

“It is her wish to travel to Earth,” the robant said patiently. “She is three hundred and fifty years old and they have ceased giving her sustenation treatments. She wishes to visit Earth before she dies.”

“But it’s a myth!” Andrews exploded. He opened and closed his mouth, but no words came.

“How much?” the old woman said. “How much?”

“I can’t do it!” Andrews shouted. “There isn’t —”

“We have a kilo positives,” the robant said.

Andrews became suddenly quiet. “A thousand positives.” He blanched in amazement. His jaws clamped shut, the color draining from his face.

“How much?” the old woman repeated. “How much?”

“Will that be sufficient?” the robant asked.

For a moment Andrews swallowed silently. Abruptly he found his voice. “Sure,” he said. “Why not?”

“Captain!” Norton protested. “Have you gone nuts? You know there’s no such place as Earth! How the hell can we —”

“Sure, we’ll take her.” Andrews buttoned his tunic slowly, hands shaking. “We’ll take her anywhere she wants to go. Tell her that. For a thousand positives we’ll be glad to take her to Earth. Okay?”

“Of course,” the robant said. “She has saved many decades for this. She will give you the kilo positives at once. She has them with her.”

“Look,” Norton said. “You can get twenty years for this. They’ll take your articles and your card and they’ll —”

“Shut up.” Andrews spun the dial of the intersystem vidsender. Under them the jets throbbed and roared. The lumbering transport had reached deep space. “I want the main information library at Centaurus II,” he said into the speaker.

“Even for a thousand positives you can’t do it. Nobody can do it. They tried to find Earth for generations. Directorate ships tracked down every moth-eaten planet in the whole —”

The vidsender clicked. “Centaurus II.”

“Information library.”

Norton caught Andrews’ arm. “Please, Captain. Even for *two* kilo positives —”

“I want the following information,” Andrews said into the vidspeaker. “All facts that are known concerning the planet Earth. Legendary birthplace of the human race.”

“No facts are known,” the detached voice of the library monitor came. “The subject is classified as metaparticular.”

“What unverified but widely circulated reports have survived?”

“Most legends concerning Earth were lost during the Centauran-Rigan conflict of 4-B33a. What survived is fragmentary. Earth is variously described as a large ringed planet with three moons, as a small, dense planet with a single moon, as the first planet of a ten-planet system located around a dwarf white —”

“What’s the most prevalent legend?”

“The Morrison Report of 5-C2 1r analyzed the total ethnic and subliminal accounts of the legendary Earth. The final summation noted that Earth is generally considered to be a small third planet of a nine-planet system, with a single moon. Other than that, no agreement of legends could be constructed.”

“I see. A third planet of a nine-planet system. With a single moon.” Andrews broke the circuit and the screen faded.

“So?” Norton said.

Andrews got quickly to his feet. “She probably knows every legend about it.” He pointed down — at the passenger quarters below. “I want to get the accounts straight.”

“Why? What are you going to do?”

Andrews flipped open the master star chart. He ran his fingers down the index and released the scanner. In a moment it turned up a card.

He grabbed the chart and fed it into the robant pilot. “The Emphor System,” he murmured thoughtfully.

“Emphor? We’re going there?”

“According to the chart, there are ninety systems that show a third planet of nine with a single moon. Of the ninety, Emphor is the closest. We’re heading there now.”

“I don’t get it,” Norton protested. “Emphor is a routine trading system. Emphor III isn’t even a Class D check point.”

Captain Andrews grinned tightly, “Emphor III has a single moon, and it’s the third of nine planets. That’s all we want.

“Does anybody know any more about Earth?” He glanced downwards. “Does *she* know any more about Earth?”

“I see,” Norton said slowly. “I’m beginning to get the picture.”

Emphor III turned silently below them. A dull red globe, suspended among sickly clouds, its baked and corroded surface lapped by the congealed remains of ancient seas. Cracked, eroded cliffs jutted starkly up. The flat plains had been dug and stripped bare. Great gouged pits pocked the surface, endless gaping sores.

Norton's face twisted in revulsion. "Look at it. Is anything alive down there?"

Captain Andrews frowned. "I didn't realize it was so gutted." He crossed abruptly to the robant pilot. "There's supposed to be an auto-grapple some place down there. I'll try to pick it up."

"A grapple? You mean that waste is inhabited?"

"A few Emphorites. Degenerate trading colony of some sort." Andrews consulted the card. "Commercial ships come here occasionally. Contact with this region has been vague since the Centauran-Rigan War."

The passage rang with a sudden sound. The gleaming robant and Mrs Gordon emerged through the doorway into the control room. The old woman's face was alive with excitement. "Captain! Is that — is that Earth down there?"

Andrews nodded. "Yes."

The robant led Mrs Gordon over to the big viewscreen. The old woman's face twitched, ripples of emotion stirring her withered features. "I can hardly believe that's really Earth. It seems impossible."

Norton glanced sharply at Captain Andrews.

"It's Earth," Andrews stated, not meeting Norton's glance. "The moon should be around soon."

The old woman did not speak. She had turned her back.

Andrews contacted the auto-grapple and hooked the robant pilot on. The transport shuddered and then began to drop, as the beam from Emphor caught it and took over.

“We’re landing,” Andrews said to the old woman, touching her on the shoulder.

“She can’t hear you, sir,” the robant said.

Andrews grunted. “Well, she can see.”

Below them the pitted, ruined surface of Emphor III was rising rapidly. The ship entered the cloud belt and emerged, coasting over a barren plain that stretched as far as the eye could see.

“What happened down there?” Norton said to Andrews. “The war?”

“War. Mining. And it’s old. The pits are probably bomb craters. Some of the long trenches may be scoop gouges. Looks like they really exhausted this place.”

A crooked row of broken mountain peaks shot past under them. They were nearing the remains of an ocean. Dark, unhealthy water lapped below, a vast sea, crusted with salt and waste, its edges disappearing into banks of piled debris.

“Why is it that way?” Mrs Gordon said suddenly. Doubt crossed her features. “Why?”

“What do you mean?” Andrews said.

“I don’t understand.” She stared uncertainly down at the surface below. “It isn’t supposed to be this way. Earth is green. Green and alive. Blue

water and…” Her voice trailed off uneasily. *“Why?”*

Andrews grabbed some paper and wrote:

COMMERCIAL OPERATIONS EXHAUSTED SURFACE

Mrs Gordon studied his words, her lips twitching. A spasm moved through her, shaking the thin, dried-out body. “Exhausted…” Her voice rose in shrill dismay. “It’s not supposed to be this way! I don’t *want* it this way!”

The robant took her arm. “She had better rest. I’ll return her to her quarters. Please notify us when the landing has been made.”

“Sure.” Andrews nodded awkwardly as the robant led the old woman from the viewscreen. She clung to the guide rail, face distorted with fear and bewilderment.

“Something’s wrong!” she wailed. “Why is it this way? Why…”

The robant led her from the control room. The closing of the hydraulic safety doors cut off her thin cry abruptly.

Andrews relaxed, his body sagging. “God.” He lit a cigarette shakily. “What a racket she makes.”

“We’re almost down,” Norton said frigidly.

Cold wind lashed at them as they stepped out cautiously. The air smelled bad — sour and acrid. Like rotten eggs. The wind brought salt and sand blowing up against their faces.

A few miles off the thick sea lay. They could hear it swishing faintly, gummily. A few birds passed silently overhead, great wings flapping soundlessly.

“Depressing damn place,” Andrews muttered.

“Yeah. I wonder what the old lady’s thinking.”

Down the descent ramp came the glittering robant, helping the little old woman. She moved hesitantly, unsteady, gripping the robant’s metal arm. The cold wind whipped around her frail body. For a moment she tottered — and then came on, leaving the ramp and gaining the uneven ground.

Norton shook his head. “She looks bad. This air. And the wind.”

“I know.” Andrews moved back toward Mrs Gordon and the robant. “How is she?” he asked.

“She is not well, sir,” the robant answered.

“Captain,” the old woman whispered.

“What is it?”

“You must tell me the truth. Is this — is this really Earth?”

She watched his lips closely. “You swear it is? You *swear?”* Her voice rose in shrill terror.

“It’s Earth!” Andrews snapped irritably. “I told you before. Of course it’s Earth.”

“It doesn’t look like Earth.” Mrs Gordon clung to his answer, panic-stricken. “It doesn’t look like Earth, Captain. Is it really Earth?”

“Yes!”

Her gaze wandered toward the ocean. A strange look flickered across her tired face, igniting her faded eyes with sudden hunger. “Is that water? I want to see.”

Andrews turned to Norton. “Get the launch out. Drive her where she wants.”

Norton pulled back angrily. “Me?”

“That’s an order.”

“Okay.” Norton returned reluctantly to the ship. Andrews lit a cigarette moodily and waited. Presently the launch slid out of the ship, coasting across the ash toward them.

“You can show her anything she wants,” Andrews said to the robant. “Norton will drive you.”

“Thank you, sir,” the robant said. “She will be grateful. She has wanted all her life to stand on Earth. She remembers her grandfather telling her about it. She believes that he came from Earth, a long time ago. She is very old. She is the last living member of her family.”

“But Earth is just a —” Andrews caught him. “I mean —”

“Yes, sir. But she is very old. And she has waited many years.” The robant turned to the old woman and led her gently toward the launch. Andrews stared after them sullenly, rubbing his jaw and frowning.

“Okay,” Norton’s voice came from the launch. He slid the hatch open and the robant led the old woman carefully inside. The hatch closed after them.

A moment later the launch shot away across the salt flat, toward the ugly, lapping ocean.

Norton and Captain Andrews paced restlessly along the shore. The sky was darkening. Sheets of salt blew against them. The mud flats stank in the gathering gloom of night. Dimly, off in the distance, a line of hills faded into the silence and vapors.

"Go on," Andrews said. "What then?"

"That's all. She got out of the launch. She and the robant. I stayed inside. They stood looking across the ocean. After a while the old woman sent the robant back to the launch."

"Why?"

"I don't know. She wanted to be alone, I suppose. She stood for a time by herself. On the shore. Looking over the water. The wind rising. All at once she just sort of settled down. She sank down in a heap, into the salt ash."

"Then what?"

"While I was pulling myself together, the robant leaped out and ran to her. It picked her up. It stood for a second and then it started for the water. I leaped out of the launch, yelling. It stepped into the water and disappeared. Sank down in the mud and filth. Vanished." Norton shuddered. "With her body."

Andrews tossed his cigarette savagely away. The cigarette rolled off, glowing behind them. "Anything more?"

"Nothing. It all happened in a second. She was standing there, looking over the water. Suddenly she quivered — like a dead branch. Then she just sort of dwindled away. And the robant was out of the launch and into the water with her before I could figure out what was happening."

The sky was almost dark. Huge clouds drifted across the faint stars. Clouds of unhealthy night vapors and particles of waste. A flock of immense birds crossed the horizon, flying silently.

Against the broken hills the moon was rising. A diseased, barren globe, tinted faintly yellow. Like old parchment.

“Let’s get back in the ship,” Andrews said. “I don’t like this place.”

“I can’t figure out why it happened. The old woman.” Norton shook his head.

“The wind. Radioactive toxins. I checked with Centaurus II. The War devastated the whole system. Left the planet a lethal wreck.”

“Then we won’t —”

“No. We won’t have to answer for it.” They continued for a time in silence. “We won’t have to explain. It’s evident enough. Anybody coming here, especially an old person —”

“Only nobody would come here,” Norton said bitterly. “Especially an old person.”

Andrews didn’t answer. He paced along, head down, hands in pockets. Norton followed silently behind. Above them, the single moon grew brighter as it escaped the mists and entered a patch of clear sky.

“By the way,” Norton said, his voice cold and distant behind Andrews. “This is the last trip I’ll be making with you. While I was in the ship I filed a formal request for new papers.”

“Oh.”

“Thought I’d let you know. And my share of the kilo positives. You can keep it.”

Andrews flushed and increased his pace, leaving Norton behind. The old woman’s death had shaken him. He lit another cigarette and then threw it away.

Damn it — the fault wasn’t *his*. She had been old. Three hundred and fifty years. Senile and deaf. A faded leaf, carried off by the wind. By the poisonous wind that lashed and twisted endlessly across the ruined face of the planet.

The ruined face. Salt ash and debris. The broken line of crumbling hills. And the silence. The eternal silence. Nothing but the wind and the lapping of the thick stagnant water. And the dark birds overhead.

Something glinted. Something at his feet, in the salt ash. Reflecting the sickly pallor of the moon.

Andrews bent down and groped in the darkness. His fingers closed over something hard. He picked the small disc up and examined it.

“Strange,” he said.

It wasn’t until they were out in deep space, roaring back towards Fomalhaut, that he remembered the disc.

He slid away from the control panel, searching his pockets for it.

The disc was worn and thin. And terribly old. Andrews rubbed it and spat on it until it was clean enough to make out. A faint impression — nothing more. He turned it over. A token? Washer? Coin?

On the back were a few meaningless letters. Some ancient, forgotten script. He held the disc to the light until he made the letters out.

He shrugged, tossed the ancient bit of metal into a waste disposal unit beside him, and turned his attention to the star charts, and home…

Imposter

“One of these days I’m going to take time off,” Spence Olham said at first-meal. He looked around at his wife. “I think I’ve earned a rest. Ten years is a long time.”

“And the Project?”

“The war will be won without me. This ball of clay of ours isn’t really in much danger.” Olham sat down at the table and lit a cigarette. “The newsmachines alter dispatches to make it appear the Outspacers are right on top of us. You know what I’d like to do on my vacation? I’d like to take a camping trip to those mountains outside of town, where we went that time. Remember? I got poison oak and you almost stepped on a gopher snake.”

“Sutton Wood?” Mary began to clear away the food dishes. “The Wood was burned a few weeks ago. I thought you knew. Some kind of flash fire.”

Olham sagged. “Didn’t they even try to find the cause?” His lips twisted. “No one cares anymore. All they can think of is the war.” He clamped his jaws together, the whole picture coming up in his mind, the Outspacers, the war, the needle-ships.

“How can we think about anything else?”

Olham nodded. She was right, of course. The dark little ships out of Alpha Centauri had bypassed the Earth cruisers easily, leaving them like helpless turtles. It had been one-way fights, all the way back to Terra.

All the way, until the protec-bubble was demonstrated by Westinghouse Labs. Thrown around the major Earth cities and finally the planet itself, the bubble was the first real defense, the first legitimate answer to the Outspacers — as the newsmachines labeled them.

But to win the war, that was another thing. Every lab, every project was working night and day, endlessly, to find something more: a weapon for positive combat. His own project, for example. All day long, year after year.

Olham stood up, putting out his cigarette. “Like the Sword of Damocles. Always hanging over us. I’m getting tired. All I want to do is take a long rest. But I guess everybody feels that way.”

He got his jacket from the closet and went out on the front porch. The shoot would be along any moment, the fast little bug that would carry him to the Project.

“I hope Nelson isn’t late.” He looked at his watch. “It’s almost seven.”

“Here the bug comes,” Mary said, gazing between the rows of houses. The sun glittered behind the roofs, reflecting against the heavy lead plates. The settlement was quiet; only a few people were stirring. “I’ll see you later. Try not to work beyond your shift, Spence.”

Olham opened the car door and slid inside, leaning back against the seat with a sigh. There was an older man with Nelson.

“Well?” Olham said, as the bug shot ahead. “Heard any interesting news?”

The usual,” Nelson said. “A few Outspace ships hit, another asteroid abandoned for strategic reasons.”

“It’ll be good when we get the Project into final stage. Maybe it’s just the propaganda from the newsmachines, but in the last month I’ve gotten weary of all this. Everything seems so grim and serious, no color to life.”

“Do you think the war is in vain?” the older man said suddenly. “You are an integral part of it, yourself.”

“This is Major Peters,” Nelson said. Olham and Peters shook hands. Olham studied the older man.

“What brings you along so early?” he said. “I don’t remember seeing you at the Project before.”

“No, I’m not with the Project,” Peters said, “but I know something about what you’re doing. My own work is altogether different.”

A look passed between him and Nelson. Olham noticed it and he frowned. The bug was gaining speed, flashing across the barren, lifeless ground toward the distant rim of the Project building.

“What is your business?” Olham said. “Or aren’t you permitted to talk about it?”

“I’m with the government,” Peters said. “With FSA, the security organ.”

“Oh?” Olham raised an eyebrow. “Is there any enemy infiltration in this region?”

“As a matter of fact I’m here to see you, Mr Olham.”

Olham was puzzled. He considered Peters” words, but he could make nothing of them. “To see me? Why?”

“I’m here to arrest you as an Outspace spy. That’s why I’m up so early this morning. *Grab him Nelson —”*

The gun drove into Olham’s ribs. Nelson’s hands were shaking, trembling with released emotion, his face pale. He took a deep breath and let it out again.

“Shall we kill him now?” he whispered to Peters. “I think we should kill him now. We can’t wait.”

Olham stared into his friend’s face. He opened his mouth to speak, but no words came. Both men were staring at him steadily, rigid and grim with fright. Olham felt dizzy. His head ached and spun.

“I don’t understand,” he murmured.

At that moment the shoot car left the ground and rushed up, heading into space. Below them the Project fell away, smaller and smaller, disappearing. Olham shut his mouth.

“We can wait a little,” Peters said. “I want to ask him some questions first.”

Olham gazed dully ahead as the bug rushed through space.

“The arrest was made all right,” Peters said into the vidscreen. On the screen the features of the security chief showed. “It should be a load off everyone’s mind.”

“Any complications?”

“None. He entered the bug without suspicion. He didn’t seem to think my presence was too unusual.”

“Where are you now?”

“On our way out, just inside the protec-bubble. We’re moving at a maximum speed. You can assume that the critical period is past. I’m glad the takeoff jets in this craft were in good working order. If there had been any failure at that point —”

“Let me see him,” the security chief said. He gazed directly at Olham where he sat, his hands in his lap, staring ahead.

“So that’s the man.” He looked at Olham for a time. Olham said nothing. At last the chief nodded to Peters. “All right. That’s enough.” A faint trace of disgust wrinkled his features. “I’ve seen all I want. You’ve done something that will be remembered for a long time. They’re preparing some sort of citation for both of you.”

“That’s not necessary,” Peters said.

“How much danger is there now? Is there still much chance that —”

“There is some chance, but not too much. According to my understanding it requires a verbal key phrase. In any case we’ll have to take the risk.”

“I’ll have the Moon base notified you’re coming.”

“No.” Peters shook his head. “I’ll land the ship outside, beyond the base. I don’t want it in jeopardy.”

“Just as you like.” The chief’s eyes flickered as he glanced again at Olham. Then his image faded. The screen blanked.

Olham shifted his gaze to the window. The ship was already through the protec-bubble, rushing with greater and greater speed all the time. Peters was in a hurry; below him, rumbling under the floor, the jets were wide-open. They were afraid, hurrying frantically, because of him.

Next to him on the seat, Nelson shifted uneasily. “I think we should do it now,” he said. “I’d give anything if we could get it over with.”

“Take it easy,” Peters said. “I want you to guide the ship for a while so I can talk to him.”

He slid over beside Olham, looking into his face. Presently he reached out and touched him gingerly, on the arm and then on the cheek.

Olham said nothing. *If I could let Mary know,* he thought again. *If I could find some way of letting her know.* He looked around the ship. How? The vidscreen? Nelson was sitting by the board, holding the gun. There was nothing he could do. He was caught, trapped.

But why?

"Listen," Peters said, "I want to ask you some questions. You know where we're going. We're moving Moonward. In an hour we'll land on the far side, on the desolate side. After we land you'll be turned over immediately to a team of men waiting there. Your body will be destroyed at once. Do you understand that?" He looked at his watch. "Within two hours your parts will be strewn over the landscape. There won't be anything left of you."

Olham struggled out of his lethargy. "Can't you tell me —"

"Certainly, I'll tell you." Peters nodded. "Two days ago we received a report that an Outspace ship had penetrated the protec-bubble. The ship let off a spy in the form of a humanoid robot. The robot was to destroy a particular human being and take his place."

Peters looked calmly at Olham.

"Inside the robot was a U-Bomb. Our agent did not know how the bomb was to be detonated, but he conjectured that it might be by a particular spoken phrase, a certain group of words. The robot would live the life of the person he killed, entering into his usual activities, his job, his social life. He had been constructed to resemble that person. No one would know the difference."

Olham's face went sickly chalk.

"The person whom the robot was to impersonate was Spence Olham, a high-ranking official at one of the research Projects. Because this particular Project was approaching crucial stage, the presence of an animate bomb, moving toward the center of the Project —"

Olham stared down at his hands. *"But I'm Olham."*

"Once the robot had located and killed Olham it was a simple matter to take over his life. The robot was released from the ship eight days ago. The substitution was probably accomplished over the last weekend, when Olham went for a short walk in the hills."

"But I'm Olham." He turned to Nelson, sitting at the controls. "Don't you recognize me? You've known me for twenty years. Don't you remember how we went to college together?" He stood up,. "You and I were at the University. We had the same room." He went toward Nelson.

"Stay away from me!" Nelson snarled.

"Listen. Remember our second year? Remember that girl? What was her name —" He rubbed his forehead. "The one with the dark hair. The one we met over at Ted's place."

"Stop!" Nelson waved the gun frantically. "I don't want to hear any more. You killed him! You… machine."

Olham looked at Nelson. "You're wrong. I don't know what happened, but the robot never reached me. Something must have gone wrong. Maybe the ship crashed." He turned to Peters. "I'm Olham. I know it. No transfer was made. I'm the same as I've always been."

He touched himself, running his hands over his body. "There must be some way to prove it. Take me back to Earth. An X-ray examination, a

neurological study, anything like that will show you. Or maybe we can find the crashed ship."

Neither Peters nor Nelson spoke.

"I am Olham," he said again. "I know I am. But I can't prove it."

"The robot," Peters said, "would be unaware that he was not the real Spence Olham. He would become Olham in mind as well as body. He was given an artificial memory system, false recall. He would look like him, have his memories, his thoughts and interests, perform his job.

"But there would be one difference. Inside the robot is a U-Bomb, ready to explode at the trigger phrase." Peters moved a little away. That's the one difference. That's why we're taking you to the Moon. They'll disassemble you and remove the bomb. Maybe it will explode, but it won't matter, not there."

Olham sat down slowly.

"We'll be there soon," Nelson said.

He lay back, thinking frantically, as the ship dropped slowly down. Under them was the pitted surface of the Moon, the endless expanse of ruin. What could he do? What would save him?

"Get ready," Peters said.

In a few minutes he would be dead. Down below he could see a tiny dot, a building of some kind. There were men in the building, the demolition team, waiting to tear him to bits. They would rip him open, pull off his arms and legs, break him apart. When they found no bomb they would be surprised; they would know, but it would be too late.

Olham looked around the small cabin. Nelson was still holding the gun. There was no chance there. If he could get to a doctor, have an examination made — that was the only way. Mary could help him. He thought frantically, his mind racing. Only a few minutes, just a little time left. If he could contact her, get word to her some way.

"Easy," Peters said. The ship came down slowly, bumping on the rough ground. There was silence.

"Listen," Olham said thickly. "I can prove I'm Spence Olham. Get a doctor. Bring him here —"

"There's the squad," Nelson pointed. "They're coming." He glanced nervously at Olham. "I hope nothing happens."

"We'll be gone before they start work," Peters said. "We'll be out of here in a moment." He put on his pressure suit. When he had finished he took the gun from Nelson. "I'll watch him for a moment."

Nelson put on his pressure suit, hurrying awkwardly. "How about him?" He indicated Olham. "Will he need one?"

"No." Peters shook his head. "Robots probably don't require oxygen."

The group of men were almost to the ship. They halted, waiting. Peters signaled to them.

"Come on!" He waved his hand and the men approached warily; stiff, grotesque figures in their inflated suits.

"If you open the door," Olham said, "it means my death. It will be murder."

"Open the door," Nelson said. He reached for the handle.

Olham watched him. He saw the man's hand tighten around the metal rod. In a moment the door would swing back, the air in the ship would rush out. He would die, and presently they would realize their mistake. Perhaps at some other time, when there was no war, men might not act this way, hurrying an individual to his death because they were afraid. Everyone was frightened, everyone was willing to sacrifice the individual because of the group fear.

He was being killed because they could not wait to be sure of his guilt. There was not enough time.

He looked at Nelson. Nelson had been his friend for years. They had gone to school together. He had been best man at his wedding. Now Nelson was going to kill him. But Nelson was not wicked; it was not his fault. It was the times. Perhaps it had been the same way during the plagues. When men had shown a spot they probably had been killed, too, without a moment's hesitation, without proof, on suspicion alone. In times of danger there was no other way.

He did not blame them. But he had to live. His life was too precious to be sacrificed. Olham thought quickly. What could he do? Was there anything? He looked around.

"Here goes," Nelson said.

"You're right," Olham said. The sound of his own voice surprised him. It was the strength of desperation. "I have no need of air. Open the door."

They paused, looking at him in curious alarm.

"Go ahead. Open it. It makes no difference." Olham's hand disappeared inside his jacket. "I wonder how far you two can run?"

"Run?"

“You have fifteen seconds to live.” Inside his jacket his fingers twisted, his arm suddenly rigid. He relaxed, smiling a little. “You were wrong about the trigger phrase. In that respect you were mistaken. Fourteen seconds, now.”

Two shocked faces stared at him from the pressure suits. Then they were struggling, running, tearing the door open. The air shrieked out, spilling into the void. Peters and Nelson bolted out of the ship. Olham came after them. He grasped the door and dragged it shut. The automatic pressure system chugged furiously, restoring the air. Olham let his breath out with a shudder.

One more second —

Beyond the window the two men had joined the group. The group scattered, running in all directions. One by one they threw themselves down, prone on the ground. Olham seated himself at the control board. He moved the dials into place. As the ship rose up into the air the men below scrambled to their feet and stared up, their mouths open. “Sorry,” Olham murmured, “but I’ve got to get back to Earth.” He headed the ship back the way it had come.

It was night. All around the ship crickets chirped, disturbing the chill darkness. Olham bent over the vidscreen. Gradually the image formed; the call had gone through without trouble. He breathed a sigh of relief.

“Mary,” he said. The woman stared at him. She gasped.

“Spence! Where are you? What’s happened?”

“I can’t tell you. Listen, I have to talk fast. They may break this call off any minute. Go to the Project grounds and get Dr Chamberlain. If he isn’t there, get any doctor. Bring him to the house and have him stay there. Have him bring equipment, X-ray, fluoroscope, everything.”

“But —”

“Do as I say. Hurry. Have him get it ready in an hour.” Olham leaned toward the screen. “Is everything all right? Are you alone?”

“Alone?”

“Is anyone with you? Has… has Nelson or anyone contacted you?”

“No. Spence, I don’t understand.”

“All right. I’ll see you at the house in an hour. And don’t tell anyone anything. Get Chamberlain there on any pretext. Say you’re very ill.”

He broke the connection and looked at his watch. A moment later he left the ship, stepping down into the darkness. He had a half mile to go.

He began to walk.

One light showed in the window, the study light. He watched it, kneeling against the fence. There was no sound, no movement of any kind. He held his watch up and read it by starlight. Almost an hour had passed.

Along the street a shoot bug came. It went on.

Olham looked toward the house. The doctor should have already come. He should be inside, waiting with Mary. A thought struck him. Had she been able to leave the house? Perhaps they had intercepted her. Maybe he was moving into a trap.

But what else could he do?

With a doctor’s records, photographs and reports, there was a chance, a chance of proof. If he could be examined, if he could remain alive long enough for them to study him —

He could prove it that way. It was probably the only way. His one hope lay inside the house. Dr Chamberlain was a respected man. He was the staff doctor for the Project. He would know, his word on the matter would have meaning. He could overcome their hysteria, their madness, with facts.

Madness — that was what it was. If only they would wait, act slowly, take their time. But they could not wait. He had to die, die at once, without proof, without any kind of trial or examination.The simplest test would tell, but they had no time for the simplest test. They could think only of the danger. Danger, and nothing more.

He stood up and moved toward the house. He came up on the porch. At the door he paused, listening. Still no sound. The house was absolutely still.

Too still.

Olham stood on the porch, unmoving. They were trying to be silent inside. Why? It was a small house; only a few feet away, beyond the door, Mary and Dr Chamberlain should be standing. Yet he could hear nothing, no sound of voices, nothing at all. He looked at the door. It was a door he had opened and closed a thousand times, every morning and every night.

He put his hand on the knob. Then, all at once, he reached out and touched the bell instead. The bell pealed, off some place in the back of the house. Olham smiled. He could hear movement.

Mary opened the door. As soon as he saw her face he knew.

He ran, throwing himself into the bushes. A security officer shoved Mary out of the way, firing past her. The bushes burst apart. Olham wriggled around the side of the house. He leaped up and ran, racing frantically into the darkness. A searchlight snapped on, a beam of light circling past him.

He crossed the road and squeezed over a fence. He jumped down and made his way across a backyard. Behind him men were coming, security officers, shouting to each other as they came. Olham gasped for breath, his chest rising and falling.

Her face — he had known at once. The set lips, the terrified, wretched eyes. Suppose he had gone ahead, pushed open the door and entered! They had tapped the call and come at once, as soon as he had broken off. Probably she believed their account. No doubt she thought he was the robot, too.

Olham ran on and on. He was losing the officers, dropping them behind. Apparently they were not much good at running. He climbed a hill and made his way down the other side. In a moment he would be back at the ship. But where to, this time? He slowed down, stopping. He could see the ship already, outlined against the sky, where he had parked it. The settlement was behind him; he was on the outskirts of the wilderness between the inhabited places, where the forests and desolation began. He crossed a barren field and entered the trees.

As he came toward it, the door of the ship opened.

Peters stepped out, framed against the light. In his arms was a heavy Boris gun. Olham stopped, rigid. Peters stared around him, into the darkness. “I know you’re there, some place,” he said. “Come on up here, Olham. There are security men all around you.”

Olham did not move.

“Listen to me. We will catch you very shortly. Apparently you still do not believe you’re the robot. Your call to the woman indicates that you are still under the illusion created by your artificial memories.

“But you *are* the robot. You are the robot, and inside you is the bomb. Any moment the trigger phrase may be spoken, by you, by someone else, by anyone. When that happens the bomb will destroy everything for miles

around. The Project, the woman, all of us will be killed. Do you understand?”

Olham said nothing. He was listening. Men were moving toward him, slipping through the woods.

“If you don’t come out, we’ll catch you. It will only be a matter of time. We no longer plan to remove you to the Moon base. You will be destroyed on sight, and we will have to take the chance that the bomb will detonate. I have ordered every available security officer into the area. The whole county is being searched, inch by inch. There is no place you can go. Around this wood is a cordon of armed men. You have about six hours left before the last inch is covered.”

Olham moved away. Peters went on speaking; he had not seen him at all. It was too dark to see anyone. But Peters was right. There was no place he could go. He was beyond the settlement, on the outskirts where the woods began. He could hide for a time, but eventually they would catch him.

Only a matter of time.

Olham walked quietly through the wood. Mile by mile, each part of the county was being measured off, laid bare, searched, studied, examined. The cordon was coming all the time, squeezing him into a smaller and smaller space.

What was there left? He had lost the ship, the one hope of escape. They were at his home; his wife was with them, believing, no doubt, that the real Olham had been killed. He clenched his fists. Some place there was a wrecked Outspace needle-ship, and in it the remains of the robot. Somewhere nearby the ship had crashed and broken up.

And the robot lay inside, destroyed.

A faint hope stirred him. What if he could find the remains? If he could show them the wreckage, the remains of the ship, the robot —

But where? Where would he find it?

He walked on, lost in thought. Some place, not too far off, probably. The ship would have landed close to the Project; the robot would have expected to go the rest of the way on foot. He went up the side of the hill and looked around. Crashed and burned. Was there some clue, some hint? Had he read anything, heard anything? Some place close by, within walking distance. Some wild place, a remote spot where there would be no people.

Suddenly Olham smiled. Crashed and burned —

Sutton Wood.

He increased his pace.

It was morning. Sunlight filtered down through the broken trees, onto the man crouching at the edge of the clearing. Olham glanced up from time to time, listening. They were not far off, only a few minutes away. He smiled.

Down below him, strewn across the clearing and into the charred stumps that had been Sutton Wood, lay a tangled mass of wreckage. In the sunlight it glittered a little, gleaming darkly. He had not had too much trouble finding it. Sutton Wood was a place he knew well; he had climbed around it many times in his life, when he was younger. He had known where he would find the remains. There was one peak that jutted up suddenly, without a warning.

A descending ship, unfamiliar with the Wood, had little chance of missing it. And now he squatted, looking down at the ship, or what remained of it.

Olham stood up. He could hear them, only a little distance away, coming together, talking in low tones. He tensed himself. Everything

depended on who first saw him. If it was Nelson, he had no chance. Nelson would fire at once. He would be dead before they saw the ship. But if he had time to call out, hold them off for a moment — that was all he needed. Once they saw the ship he would be safe.

But if they fired first —

A charred branch cracked. A figure appeared, coming forward uncertainly. Olham took a deep breath. Only a few seconds remained, perhaps the last seconds of his life. He raised his arms, peering intently.

It was Peters.

"Peters!" Olham waved his arms. Peters lifted his gun, aiming. "Don't fire!" His voice shook. "Wait a minute. Look past me, across the clearing."

"I've found him," Peters shouted. Security men came pouring out of the burned woods around him.

"Don't shoot. *Look* past me. The ship, the needle-ship. The Outspace ship. Look!"

Peters hesitated. The gun wavered.

"It's down there," Olham said rapidly. "I knew I'd find it here. The burned wood. Now you believe me. You'll find the remains of the robot in the ship. Look, will you?"

"There is something down there," one of the men said nervously.

"Shoot him!" a voice said. It was Nelson.

"Wait." Peters turned sharply. "I'm in charge. Don't anyone fire. Maybe he's telling the truth."

“Shoot him,” Nelson said. “He killed Olham. Any minute he may kill us all. If the bomb goes off —”

“Shut up.” Peters advanced toward the slope. He stared down. “Look at that.” He waved two men up to him. “Go down there and see what that is.”

The men raced down the slope, across the clearing. They bent down, poking in the ruins of the ship.

“Well?” Peters called.

Olham held his breath. He smiled a little. It must be there; he had not had time to look, himself, but it had to be there. Suddenly doubt assailed him. Suppose the robot had lived long enough to wander away? Suppose his body had been completely destroyed, burned to ashes by the fire?

He licked his lips. Perspiration came out on his forehead. Nelson was staring at him, his face still livid. His chest rose and fell.

“Kill him,” Nelson said. “Before he kills us.”

The two men stood up.

“What have you found?” Peters said. He held the gun steady. “Is there anything there?”

“Looks like something. It’s a needle-ship, all right. There’s something beside it.”

“I’ll look.” Peters strode past Olham. Olham watched him go down the hill and up to the men. The others were following after him, peering to see.

“It’s a body of some sort,” Peters said. “Look at it!”

Olham came along with them. They stood around in a circle, staring down.

On the ground, bent and twisted in a strange shape, was a grotesque form. It looked human, perhaps; except that it was bent so strangely, the arms and legs flung off in all directions. The mouth was open; the eyes stared glassily.

“Like a machine that’s run down,” Peters murmured.

Olham smiled feebly. “Well?” he said.

Peters looked at him. “I can’t believe it. You were telling the truth all the time.”

“The robot never reached me,” Olham said. He took out a cigarette and lit it. “It was destroyed when the ship crashed. You were all too busy with the war to wonder why an out-of-the-way wood would suddenly catch fire and burn. Now you know.”

He stood smoking, watching the men. They were dragging the grotesque remains from the ship. The body was stiff, the arms and legs rigid.

“You’ll find the bomb now,” Olham said. The men laid the body on the ground. Peters bent down.

“I think I see the corner of it.” He reached out, touching the body.

The chest of the corpse had been laid open. Within the gaping tear something glinted, something metal. The men stared at the metal without speaking.

“That would have destroyed us all, if it had lived,” Peters said. “That metal box there.”

There was silence.

“I think we owe you something,” Peters said to Olham. “This must have been a nightmare to you. If you hadn’t escaped, we would have —” He broke off.

Olham put out his cigarette. “I knew, of course, that the robot had never reached me. But I had no way of proving it. Sometimes it isn’t possible to prove a thing right away. That was the whole trouble. There wasn’t any way I could demonstrate that I was myself.”

“How about a vacation?” Peters said. “I think we might work out a month’s vacation for you. You could take it easy, relax.”

“I think right now I want to go home,” Olham said.

“All right, then,” Peters said. “Whatever you say.”

Nelson had squatted down on the ground, beside the corpse. He reached out toward the glint of metal visible within the chest.

“Don’t touch it,” Olham said. “It might still go off. We better let the demolition squad take care of it later on.”

Nelson said nothing. Suddenly he grabbed hold of the metal, reaching his hand inside the chest. He pulled.

“What are you doing?” Olham cried.

Nelson stood up. He was holding on to the metal object. His face was blank with terror. It was a metal knife, an Outspace needle-knife, covered with blood.

“This killed him,” Nelson whispered. “My friend was killed with this.” He looked at Olham. “You killed him with this and left him beside the ship.”

Olham was trembling. His teeth chattered. He looked from the knife to the body. “This can’t be Olham,” he said. His mind spun, everything was whirling. “Was I wrong?”

He gaped.

“But if that’s Olham, then I must be —”

He did not complete the sentence, only the first phrase. The blast was visible all the way to Alpha Centauri.

James P. Crow

“You’re a nasty little — *human being,*” the newly-formed Z Type robot shrilled peevishly.

Donnie flushed and slunk away. It was true. He was a human being, a human child. And there was nothing science could do. He was stuck with it. A human being in a robot’s world.

He wished he were dead. He wished he lay under the grass and the worms were eating him up and crawling through him and devouring his brain, his poor miserable human’s brain. The Z-236r, his robot companion, wouldn’t have anybody to play with and it would be sorry.

“Where are you going?” Z-236r demanded.

“Home.”

“Sissy.”

Donnie didn’t reply. He gathered up his set of fourth dimensional chess, stuffed it in his pocket, and walked off between the rows of ecarda trees, toward the human quarter. Behind him, Z236r stood gleaming in the late afternoon sun, a pale tower of metal and plastic.

“See if I care,” Z-236r shouted sullenly. “Who wants to play with a human being, anyhow? Go on home. You — you smell.”

Donnie said nothing. But he hunched over a little more. And his chin sank lower against his chest.

“Well, it happened,” Edgar Parks said gloomily to his wife, across the kitchen table.

Grace looked quickly up. “It?”

“Donnie learned his place today. He told me while I was changing my clothes. One of the new robots he was playing with. Called him a human being. Poor kid. Why the hell do they have to rub it in? Why can’t they let us alone?”

“So that’s why he didn’t want any dinner. He’s in his room. I knew something had happened.” Grace touched her husband’s hand. “He’ll get over it. We all have to learn the hard way. He’s strong. He’ll snap back.”

Ed Parks got up from the table and moved into the livingroom of his modest five-room dwelling unit, located in the section of the city set aside for humans. He didn’t feel like eating. “Robots.” He clenched his fists futilely. “I’d like to get hold of one of them. Just once. Get my hands into their guts. Rip out handfuls of wires and parts. Just once before I die.”

“Maybe you’ll get your chance.”

“No. No, it’ll never come to that. Anyhow, humans wouldn’t be able to run things without robots. It’s true, honey. Humans haven’t got the integration to maintain a society. The Lists prove that twice a year. Let’s face it. Humans are inferior to robots. But it’s their damn holding it up to us! Like today with Donnie. Holding it up to our faces. I don’t mind being a robot’s body servant. It’s a good job. Pays well and the work is light. But when my kid gets told he’s —”

Ed broke off. Donnie had come out of his room slowly, into the livingroom. “Hi, Dad.”

“Hi, son.” Ed thumped the boy gently on the back. “How you doing? Want to take in a show tonight?”

Humans entertained nightly on the vidscreens. Humans made good entertainers. That was one area the robots couldn’t compete in. Human

beings painted and wrote and danced and sang and acted for the amusement of robots. They cooked better, too, but robots didn't eat. Human beings had their place. They were understood and wanted: as body servants, entertainers, clerks, gardeners, construction workers, repairmen, odd-jobbers and factory workers.

But when it came to something like civic control coordinator or traffic supervisor for the usone tapes that fed energy into the planet's twelve hydrosystems —

"Dad," Donnie said, "can I ask you something?"

"Sure." Ed sat down on the couch with a sigh. He leaned back and crossed his legs. "What is it?"

Donnie sat quietly beside him, his little round face serious. "Dad, I want to ask you about the Lists."

"Oh, yeah." Ed rubbed his jaw. "That's right. Lists in a few weeks. Time to start boning up for your entry. We'll get out some of the sample tests and go over them. Maybe between the two of us we can get you ready for Class Twenty."

"Listen." Donnie leaned close to his father, his voice low and intense. "Dad, how many humans have ever passed their Lists?"

Ed got up abruptly and paced around the room, filling his pipe and frowning. "Well, son, that's hard to say. I mean, humans don't have access to the C-Bank records. So I can't check to see. The law says any human who gets a score in the top forty per cent is eligible for classification with a gradual upward gradation according to subsequent showing. I don't know how many humans have been able to —"

"Has *any* human ever passed his List?" Ed swallowed nervously.

“Gosh, kid. I don’t know. I mean, I don’t honestly know of any, when you put it like that. Maybe not. The Lists have been conducted only three hundred years. Before that the Government was reactionary and forbade humans to compete with robots. Nowadays, we have a liberal Government and we can compete on the Lists and if we get high enough scores…” His voice wavered and faded. “No, kid,” he said miserably. “No human ever passed a List. We’re — just — not — smart enough.”

The room was silent. Donnie nodded faintly, expressionless. Ed didn’t look at him. He concentrated on his pipe, hands shaking.

“It’s not so bad,” Ed said huskily. “I have a good job. I’m body servant to a hell of a fine N Type robot. I get big tips at Christmas and Easter. It gives me time off when I’m sick.” He cleared his throat noisily. “It’s not so bad.”

Grace was standing at the door. Now she came into the room, eyes bright. “No, not bad. Not at all. You open doors for it, bring its instruments to it, make calls for it, run errands for it, oil it, repair it, sing to it, talk to it, scan tapes for it —”

“Shut up,” Ed muttered irritably. “What the hell should I do? Quit? Maybe I should mow lawns like John Hollister and Pete Klein. At least my robot calls me by name. Like a living thing. It calls me Ed.”

“Will a human ever pass a List?” Donnie asked.

“Yes,” Grace said sharply.

Ed nodded. “Sure, kid. Of course. Someday maybe humans and robots will live together in equality. There’s an Equality Party among the robots. Holds ten seats in the Congress. They think humans should be admitted without Lists. Since it’s obvious —” He broke off. “I mean, since no humans have ever been able to pass their Lists so far —”

“Donnie,” Grace said fiercely, bending down over her son, “Listen to me. I want you to pay attention. Nobody knows this. The robots don’t talk about it. Humans don’t know. But it’s true.”

“What is it?”

“I know of a human being who — who’s classified. He passed his Lists. Ten years ago. And he’s gone up. He’s up to Class Two. Someday he’ll be Class One. Do you hear? A human being. And he’s going up.”

Donnie’s face showed doubt. “Really?” The doubt turned to wistful hope. “Class Two? No kidding?”

“It’s just a story,” Ed grunted. “I’ve heard that all my life.”

“It’s true! I heard two robots talking about it when I was cleaning up one of the Engineering Units. They stopped when they noticed me.”

“What’s his name?” Donnie asked, wide-eyed.

“James P. Crow,” Grace said proudly.

“Strange name,” Ed murmured.

“That’s his name. I know. It’s not a story. It’s true! And sometime, someday, he’ll be on the top level. On the Supreme Council.”

Bob McIntyre lowered his voice. “Yeah, it’s true, all right. James P. Crow is his name.”

“It’s not a legend?” Ed demanded eagerly.

“There really is such a human. And he’s Class Two. Gone all the way up. Passed his Lists like *that.”* Mclntyre snapped his fingers. “The robots

hush it up, but it's a fact. And the news is spreading. More and more humans know."

The two men had stopped by the service entrance of the enormous Structural Research Building. Robot officials moved busily in and out through the main doors, at the front of the building. Robot planners who guided Terran society with skill and efficiency.

Robots ran Earth. It had always been that way. The history tapes said so. Humans had been invented during the Total War of the Eleventh Millibar. All types of weapons had been tested and used; humans were one of many. The War had utterly wrecked society. For decades after, anarchy and ruin lay everywhere. Only gradually had society reformed under the patient guidance of robots. Humans had been useful in the reconstruction. But why they had originally been made, what they had been used for, how they had served in the War — all knowledge had perished in the hydrogen bomb blasts. The historians had to fill in with conjecture. They did so.

"Why such a strange name?" Ed asked.

Mclntyre shrugged. "All I know is he's sub-Advisor to the Northern Security Conference. And in line for the Council when he makes Class One."

"What do the robs think?"

"They don't like it. But there's nothing they can do. The law says they have to let a human hold a job if he's qualified. They never thought a human would be qualified, of course. But this Crow passed his Lists."

"It certainly is strange. A human, smarter than the robs. I wonder why."

"He was an ordinary repairman. A mechanic, fixing machinery and designing circuits. Unclassified, of course. Then suddenly he passed his first List. Entered Class Twenty. He rose the next bi-annual to Class

Nineteen. They had to put him to work." Mclntyre chuckled. "Too damn bad, isn't it? They have to sit with a human being."

"How do they react?"

"Some quit. Walk out, rather than sit with a human. But most stay. A lot of robs are decent. They try hard."

"I'd sure like to meet this fellow Crow."

Mclntyre frowned. "Well —"

"What is it?"

"I understand he doesn't like to be seen with humans too much."

"Why not?" Ed bristled. "What's wrong with humans? Is he too high and mighty, sitting up there with robots —"

"It's not that." There was a strange look in Mclntyre's eyes. A yearning, distant look. "It's not just that, Ed. He's up to something. Something important. I shouldn't be saying. But it's big. Big as hell."

"What is it?"

"I can't say. But wait until he gets on the Council. Wait." Mclntyre's eyes were feverish. "It's so big it'll shake the world. The stars and the sun'll shake."

"What is it?"

"I don't know. But Crow's got something up his sleeve. Something incredibly big. We're all waiting for it. Waiting for the day…"

James P. Crow sat at his polished mahogany desk, thinking. That wasn't his real name, of course. He had taken it after the first experiments, grinning to himself as he did so. Nobody would ever know what it meant; it would remain a private joke, personal and unannounced. But it was a good joke nonetheless. Biting and appropriate.

He was a small man. Irish-German. A little lean light-skinned man with blue eyes and sandy hair that fell down in his face and had to be brushed back. He wore unpressed baggy pants and rolled-up sleeves. He was nervous, high-strung. He smoked all day and drank black coffee and usually couldn't sleep at night. But there was a lot on his mind.

A hell of a lot. Crow got abruptly to his feet and paced over to the vidsender. "Send in the Commissioner of Colonies," he ordered.

The Commissioner's metal and plastic body pushed through the door, into the office. An R Type robot, patient and efficient. "You wished to —" It broke off, seeing a human. For a second its pale eye lens flickered doubtfully. A faint sheen of distaste spread across its features. "You wished to see me?"

Crow had seen that expression before. Endless times. He was used to it — almost. The surprise, and then the lofty withdrawal, the cold, clipped formality. He was "*Mister* Crow." Not Jim. The law made them address him as an equal. It hurt some of them more than others. Some showed it without restraint. This one held its feelings back a trifle; Crow was its official superior.

"Yes, I wished to see you," Crow said calmly. "I want your report. Why hasn't it come in?"

The robot stalled, still lofty and withdrawn. "Such a report takes time. We're doing the best we can."

"I want it within two weeks. No later."

The robot struggled with itself, life-long prejudices versus the requirements of Governmental codes. “All right, *sir.* The report will be ready in two weeks.” It moved out of the office. The door formed behind it.

Crow let his breath out with a rush. Doing the best they could? Hardly. Not to please a human being. Even if he was at Advisory Level, Class Two. They all dragged their feet, all the way down the line. Little things here and there.

His door melted and a robot wheeled quickly into the office. “I say there, Crow. Got a minute?”

“Of course.” Crow grinned. “Come in and sit down. I’m always glad to talk to you.”

The robot dumped some papers on Crow’s desk. “Tapes and such. Business trifles.” He eyed Crow intently. “You look upset. Anything happen?”

“A report I want. Overdue. Somebody taking its time.”

L-87t grunted. “Same old stuff. By the way… We’re having a meeting tonight. Want to come over and make a speech? Should have a good turn out.”

“Meeting?”

“Party meeting. Equality.” L-87t made a quick sign with its right gripper, a sort of half-arc in the air. The Equality sign. “We’d be glad to have you, Jim. Want to come?”

“No. I’d like to, but I have things to do.”

“Oh.” The robot moved toward the door. “All right. Thanks anyhow.” It lingered at the door. “You’d give us a shot in the arm, you know. Living

proof of our contention that a human being is the equal of a robot and should be afforded such recognition."

Crow smiled faintly. "But a human isn't the equal of a robot."

L-87t sputtered indignantly. "What are you saying? Aren't you the living proof? Look at your List scores. Perfect. Not a mistake. And in a couple of weeks you'll be Class One. Highest there is."

Crow shook his head. "Sorry. A human isn't the equal of a robot anymore than he's the equal of a stove. Or a diesel motor. Or a snowplow. There are a lot of things a human can't do. Let's face facts."

L-87t was baffled. "But —"

"I mean it. You're ignoring reality. Humans and robots are completely different. We humans can sing, act, write plays, stories, operas, paint, design sets, flower gardens, buildings, cook delicious meals, make love, scratch sonnets on menus — and robots can't. But robots can build elaborate cities and machines that function perfectly, work for days without rest, think without emotional interruption, gestalt complex data without a time lag.

"Humans excel in some fields, robots in others. Humans have highly developed emotions and feelings. Esthetic awareness. We're sensitive to colors and sounds and textures and soft music mixed with wine. All very fine things. Worthwhile. But realms totally beyond robots. Robots are purely intellectual. Which is fine, too. Both realms are fine. Emotional humans, sensitive to art and music and drama. Robots who think and plan and design machinery. But that doesn't mean we're both the same."

L-87t shook its head sadly. "I don't understand you, Jim. Don't you want to help your race?"

“Of course. But realistically. Not by ignoring facts and making an illusionary assertion that men and robots are interchangeable. Identical elements.”

A curious look slid across L-87t’s eye lens. “What’s your solution, then?”

Crow clamped his jaw tight. “Stick around another few weeks and maybe you’ll see.”

Crow headed out of the Terran Security Building and along the street. Around him robots streamed, bright hulls of metal and plastic and d/n fluid. Except for body servants, humans never came to this area. This was the managerial section of the city, the core, the nucleus, where the planning and organization went on. From this area the life of the city was controlled. Robots were everywhere. In the surface cars, on the moving ramps, the balconies, entering buildings, streaming out, standing in pale glowing knots here and there like Roman Senators, talking and discussing business.

A few greeted him, faintly, formally, with a nod of their metal heads. And then turned their backs. Most robots ignored him or pulled aside to avoid contact. Sometimes a clump of talking robots would become abruptly silent, as Crow pushed past. Robot eye lenses fixed on him, solemn and half astonished. They noticed his arm color, Class Two. Surprise and indignation. And after he had passed, a quick angry buzz of resentment. Backward glances at him as he threaded his way toward the human quarter.

A pair of humans stood in front of the Domestic Control Offices, armed with pruning shears and rakes. Gardeners, weeding and watering the lawns of the big public building. They watched Crow pass with excited stares. One waved nervously at him, feverish and hopeful. A menial human waving at the only human ever to reach classification.

Crow waved back briefly.

The two humans' eyes grew wide with awe and reverence. They were still looking after him when he turned the corner at the main intersection and mixed with the business crowds shopping at the trans-planet marts.

Goods from the wealthy colonies of Venus and Mars and Ganymede filled the open-air marts. Robots drifted in swarms, sampling and pricing and discussing and gossiping. A few humans were visible, mostly household servants in charge of maintenance, stocking up on supplies. Crow edged his way through and beyond the marts. He was approaching the human quarter of the city. He could smell it already. The faint pungent scent of humans.

The robots, of course, were odorless. In a world of odorless machines the human scent stood out in bold relief. The human quarter was a section of the city once prosperous. Humans had moved in and property values had dropped. Gradually the houses had been abandoned by robots and now humans exclusively lived there. Crow, in spite of his position, was obliged to live in the human quarter. His house, a uniform five-room dwelling, identical with the others, was located to the rear of the quarter. One house of many.

He held his hand up to the front door and the door melted. Crow entered quickly and the door reformed. He glanced at his watch. Plenty of time. An hour before he was due back at his desk.

He rubbed his hands. It was always a thrilling moment to come here, to his personal quarters, where he had grown up, lived as an ordinary unclassified human being — before he had come across *it* and begun his meteoric ascent into the upper-class regions.

Crow passed through the small silent house, to the work shed in back. He unlocked the bolted doors and slid them aside. The shed was hot and dry. He clicked off the alarm system. Complex tangles of bells and wires that were really unnecessary: robots never entered the human section, and humans seldom stole from each other.

Locking the doors behind him, Crow seated himself before a bank of machinery assembled in the center of the shed. He snapped on the power and the machinery hummed into life. Dials and meters swung into activity. Lights glowed.

Before him, a square window of gray faded to light pink and shimmered slightly. The Window. Crow's pulse throbbed painfully. He flicked a key. The Window clouded and showed a scene. He slid a tape scanner before the Window and activated it. The scanner clicked as the Window gained shape. Forms moved, dim forms that wavered and hesitated. He steadied the picture.

Two robots were standing behind a table. They moved quickly, jerkily. He slowed them down. The two robots were handling something. Crow increased the power of the image and the objects bloated up, to be caught by the scanning lens and preserved on tape.

The robots were sorting Lists. Class One Lists. Grading and dividing them into groups. Several hundred packets of questions and answers. Before the table a restless crowd waited, eager robots waiting to hear their scores. Crow speeded the image up. The two robots leaped into activity, tossing and arranging Lists in a blur of energy. Then the master Class One List was held up —

The List. Crow caught it in the Window, dropping the velocity to zero. The List was held, fixed tight like a specimen on a slide. The tape scanner hummed away, recording the questions and answers.

He felt no guilt. No sting of conscience at using a Time Window to see the results of future Lists. He had been doing it ten years, all the way up from the bottom, from unclassified up to the top List, to Class One. He had never kidded himself. Without advance sight of the answers, he could never have passed. He would still be unclassified, at the bottom of the pile, along with the great undifferentiated mass of humans.

The Lists were geared to robot minds. Made up by robots, phased to a robot culture. A culture which was alien to humans, to which humans had to

make difficult adjustment. No wonder only robots passed their Lists.

Crow wiped the scene from the Window and threw the scanner aside. He sent the Window back into time, spinning back through the centuries into the past. He never tired of seeing the early days, the days before the Total War wrecked human society and destroyed all human tradition. The days when man lived without robots.

He fiddled with the dials, capturing a moment. The Window showed robots building up their post-war society, swarming over their ruined planet, erecting vast cities and buildings, clearing away the debris. With humans as slaves. Second-class servant citizens.

He saw the Total War, the rain of death from the sky. The blossoming pale funnels of destruction. He saw man's society dissolve into radioactive particles. All human knowledge and culture lost in the chaos.

And once again, he caught his favorite of all scenes. A scene he had examined repeatedly, enjoying with acute satisfaction this unique sight. A scene of human beings in an undersurface lab, in the early days of the war. Designing and building the first robots, the original A Type robots, four centuries before.

Ed Parks walked home slowly, holding his son's hand. Donnie gazed down at the ground. He said nothing. His eyes were red and puffy. He was pale with misery.

"I'm sorry, Dad," he muttered.

Ed's grip tightened. "It's okay, kid. You did your best. Don't worry about it. Maybe next time. We'll get started practicing sooner." He cursed under his breath. "Those lousy metal tubs. Damn soul-less heaps of tin!"

It was evening. The sun was setting. The two of them climbed the porch steps slowly and entered the house. Grace met them at the door. "No luck?"

She studied their faces. “I can see. Same old story.”

“Same old story,” Ed said bitterly. “He didn’t have a chance. Hopeless.”

From the dining-room came a murmur of sound. Voices, men and women.

“Who’s in there?” Ed demanded irritably. “Do we have to have company? For God’s sake, today of all days —”

“Come on.” Grace pulled him toward the kitchen. “Some news. Maybe it’ll make you feel better. Come along, Donnie. This will interest you, too.”

Ed and Donnie entered the kitchen. It was full of people. Bob McIntyre and his wife Pat. John Hollister and his wife Joan and their two daughters. Pete Klein and Rose Klein. Neighbors, Nat Johnson and Tim Davis and Barbara Stanley. An eager murmur buzzed through the room. Everybody was grouped around the table, excited and nervous. Sandwiches and beer bottles were piled up in heaps. The men and women were laughing and grinning happily, eyes bright with agitation.

“What’s up?” Ed grumbled. “Why the party?”

Bob McIntyre clapped him on the shoulder. “How you doing, Ed? We’ve got news.” He rattled a public news tape. “Get ready. Brace yourself.”

“Read it to him,” Pete Klein said excitedly.

“Go on! Read it!” They all grouped around McIntyre. “Let’s hear it again!”

McIntyre’s face was alive with emotion. “Well, Ed. This is it. He made it. He’s there.”

“Who? Who made what?”

“Crow. Jim Crow. He made Class One.” The tape spool trembled in Mclntyre’s hand. “He’s been named to the Supreme Council. Understand? He’s in. A human being. A member of the supreme governing body of the planet.”

“Gosh,” Donnie said, awed.

“Now what?” Ed asked. “What’s he going to do?”

McIntyre grinned shakily. “We’ll know, soon. He’s got something. We know. We can feel it. And we should start seeing it in action — any time, now.”

Crow strode briskly into the Council Chamber, his portfolio under his arm. He wore a slick new suit. His hair was combed. His shoes were shined. “Good day,” he said politely.

The five robots regarded him with mixed feelings. They were old, over a century old. The powerful N Type that had dominated the social scene since its construction. And an incredibly ancient D Type, almost three centuries old. As Crow advanced toward his seat the five robots stepped away, leaving a wide path for him.

“You,” one of the N Types said. “You are the new Council member?”

“That’s right.” Crow took his seat. “Care to examine my credentials?”

“Please.”

Crow passed over the card plate given him by the Lists Committee. The five robots studied it intently. Finally they passed it back.

“It appears to be in order,” the D admitted reluctantly.

“Of course.” Crow unzipped his portfolio. “I wish to begin work at once. There’s quite a lot of material to cover. I have some reports and tapes you’ll find worth your while.”

The robots took their places slowly, eyes still on Jim Crow. “This is incredible,” the D said. “Are you serious? Can you really expect to sit with us?”

“Of course,” Crow snapped. “Let’s forgo this and get down to business.”

One of the N Types leaned toward him, massive and contemptuous, its patina-encrusted hull glinting dully. “Mr Crow,” it said icily. “You must understand this is utterly impossible. In spite of the legal ruling and your technical right to sit on this —”

Crow smiled calmly back. “I suggest you check my Listing scoring. You’ll discover I’ve made no errors in all twenty Lists. A perfect score. To my knowledge, none of you has achieved a perfect score. Therefore, according to the Governmental ruling contained in the official Lists Committee decree, I’m your superior.”

The word fell like a bomb shell. The five robots slumped down in their seats, stricken. Their eye lenses flickered uneasily. A worried hum rose in pitch, filling the chamber.

“Let’s see,” an N murmured, extending his gripper. Crow tossed his List sheets over and the five robots each scanned them rapidly.

“It’s true,” the D stated. “Incredible. No robot has ever achieved a perfect score. This human outranks us, according to our own laws.”

“Now,” Crow said. “Let’s get down to business.” He spread out his tapes and reports. “I won’t waste any time. I have a proposal to make. An important proposal bearing on the most critical problem of this society.”

“What problem is that?” an X asked apprehensively.

Crow was tense. “The problem of humans. Humans occupying an inferior position in a robot world. Menials in an alien culture. Servants of robots.”

Silence.

The five robots sat frozen. It had happened. The thing they had feared. Crow sat back in his chair, lighting a cigarette. The robots watched each motion, his hands, the cigarette, the smoke, the match as he ground it out underfoot. The moment had come.

“What do you propose?” the D asked at last, with metallic dignity. “What is this proposal of yours?”

“I propose you robots evacuate Earth at once. Pack up and leave. Emigrate to the colonies. Ganymede, Mars, Venus. Leave Earth to us humans.”

The robots got instantly up. “Incredible! We built this world. This is our world! Earth belongs to us. It has always belonged to us.”

“Has it?” Crow said grimly.

An uneasy chill moved through the robots. They hesitated, strangely alarmed. “Of course,” the D murmured.

Crow reached toward his heap of tapes and reports. The robots watched his movement with fear. “What is that?” an N demanded nervously. “What do you have there?”

Tapes,” Crow said.

“What kind of tapes?”

“History tapes.” Crow signaled and a gray-clad human servant hurried into the chamber with a tape scanner. “Thanks,” Crow said. The human started out. “Wait. You might like to stay and watch this, my friend.”

The servant’s eyes bulged. He found a place in the back and stood trembling and watching.

“Highly irregular,” the D protested. “What are you doing? What is this?”

“Watch.” Crow snapped on the scanner, feeding the first tape into it. In the air in the center of the Council table, a three-dimensional image formed. “Keep your eyes on this. You’ll remember this moment for a long time.”

The image hardened. They were looking into the Time Window. A scene from the Total War was in motion. Men, human technicians, working frantically in an undersurface lab. Assembling something. Assembling —

The human servant squawked wildly. “An A! It’s a Type A robot! They’re making it!”

The five Council robots buzzed in consternation. “Get that servant out of here!” the D ordered.

The scene changed. It showed the first robots, the original Type A, rising to the surface to fight the war. Other early robots appeared, snaking through the ruins and ash, approaching warily. The robots clashed. Bursts of white light. Gleaming clouds of particles.

“Robots were originally designed as soldiers,” Crow explained. “Then more advanced types were produced to act as technicians and lab workers and machinists.”

The scene showed an undersurface factory. Rows of robots worked presses and stampers. The robots worked rapidly, efficiently — supervised by human foremen.

“These tapes are fake!” an N cried angrily. “Do you expect us to believe this?”

A new scene formed. Robots, more advanced, types more complex and elaborate. Taking over more and more economic and industrial functions as humans were destroyed by the War.

“At first robots were simple,” Crow explained. “They served simple needs. Then, as the War progressed, more advanced types were created. Finally, humans were making Types D and E. Equal to humans — and in conceptual faculties, superior to humans.”

“This is insane!” an N stated. “Robots evolved. The early types were simple because they were original stages, primitive forms that gave rise to more complex forms. The law of evolution fully explains this process.”

A new scene formed. The last stages of the War. Robots fighting men. Robots eventually winning. The complete chaos of the latter years. Endless wastes of rolling ash and radioactive particles. Miles of ruin.

“All cultural records were destroyed,” Crow said. “Robots emerged masters without knowing how or why, or in what manner they came into being. But now you see the facts. Robots were created as human tools. During the War they got out of hand.”

He snapped off the tape scanner. The image faded. The five robots sat in stunned silence.

Crow folded his arms. “Well? What do you say?” He jerked his thumb at the human servant crouching in the rear of the chamber, dazed and astonished. “Now you know and now he knows. What do you imagine he’s thinking? I can tell you. He’s thinking —”

“How did you get these tapes?” the D demanded. “They can’t be genuine. They must be fakes.”

“Why weren’t they found by our archeologists?” an N shouted shrilly.

“I took them personally,” Crow said.

“You took them? What do you mean?”

“Through a Time Window.” Crow tossed a thick package onto the table. “Here are the schematics. You can build a Time Window yourself if you want.”

“A time machine.” The D snatched up the package and leafed through the contents. “You saw into the past.” Dawning realization showed on its ancient face. “Then —”

“He saw ahead!” an N searched wildly. “Into the future! That explains his perfect Lists. He scanned them in advance.”

Crow rattled his papers impatiently. “You’ve heard my proposal. You’ve seen the tapes. If you vote down the proposal I’ll release the tapes publicly. And the schematics. Every human in the world will know the true story of his origin, and yours.”

“So?” an N said nervously. “We can handle humans. If there’s an uprising we’ll put it down.”

“Will you?” Crow got suddenly to his feet, his face hard. “Consider. Civil war raging over the whole planet. Men on one side, centuries of pent-

up hatred. On the other side robots suddenly deprived of their myth. Knowing they were originally mechanical tools. Are you sure you'll come out on top this time? Are you positive?"

The robots were silent.

"If you'll evacuate Earth I'll suppress the tapes. The two races can go on, each with its own culture and society. Humans here on Earth. Robots on the colonies. Neither one master. Neither one slave."

The five robots hesitated, angry and resentful. "But we worked centuries to build up this planet! It won't make sense. Our leaving. What'll we say? What'll we give as our reason?"

Crow smiled harshly. "You can say Earth isn't adequate for the great original master race."

There was silence. The four Type N robots looked at each other nervously, drawing together in a whispered huddle. The massive D sat silent, its archaic brass eye lens fixed intently on Crow, a baffled, defeated expression on its face.

Calmly, Jim Crow waited.

"Can I shake your hand?" L-87t asked timidly. "I'll be going soon. I'm in one of the first loads."

Crow stuck out his hand briefly and L-87t shook, a little embarrassed.

"I hope it works out," L-87t ventured. "Vid us from time to time. Keep us posted."

Outside the Council Buildings the blaring voices of the street speakers were beginning to disturb the late afternoon gloom. All up and down the city the speakers roared out their message, the Council Directive.

Men, scurrying home from work, paused to listen. In the uniform houses in the human quarter men and women glanced up, pausing in their routine of living, curious and attentive. Everywhere, in all cities of Earth, robots and human beings ceased their activities and looked up as the Government speakers roared into life.

“This is to announce that the Supreme Council has decreed the rich colony planets Venus, Mars, and Ganymede, are to be set aside exclusively for the use of robots. No humans will be permitted outside of Earth. In order to take advantage of the superior resources and living conditions of these colonies, all robots now on Earth are to be transferred to the colony of their choice.

“The Supreme Council has decided that Earth is no fit place for robots. Its wasted and still partly-devastated condition renders it unworthy of the robot race. All robots are to be conveyed to their new homes in the colonies as quickly as adequate transportation can be arranged.

“In no case can humans enter the colony areas. The colonies are exclusively for the use of robots. The human population will be permitted to remain on Earth.

“This is to announce that the Supreme Council had decreed that the rich colony planets of Venus —”

Crow moved away from the window, satisfied.

He returned to his desk and continued assembling papers and reports in neat piles, glancing at them briefly as he classified them and laid them aside.

“I hope you humans will get along all right,” L-87t repeated. Crow continued checking the heaps of top-level reports, marking them with his writing stick. Working rapidly, with absorbed attention, deep in his work.

He scarcely noticed the robot lingering at the door. “Can you give me some idea of the government you’ll set up?”

Crow glanced up impatiently. “What?”

“Your form of government. How will your society be ruled, now that you’ve maneuvered us off Earth? What sort of government will take the place of our Supreme Council and Congress?”

Crow didn’t answer. He had already returned to his work. There was a strange granite cast to his face, a peculiar hardness L-87t had never seen.

“Who’ll run things?” L-87t asked. “Who’ll be the Government now that we’re gone? You said yourself humans show no ability to manage a complex modern society. Can you find a human capable of keeping the wheels turning? Is there a human being capable of leading mankind?”

Crow smiled thinly. And continued working.

Planet for Transients

The late afternoon sun shone down blinding and hot, a great shimmering orb in the sky. Trent halted a moment to get his breath. Inside his lead-lined helmet his face dripped with sweat, drop after drop of sticky moisture that steamed his viewplate and clogged his throat.

He slid his emergency pack over to the other side and hitched up his gun-belt. From his oxygen tank he pulled a couple of exhausted tubes and tossed them away in the brush. The tubes rolled and disappeared, lost in the endless heaps of red-green leaves and vines.

Trent checked his counter, found the reading low enough, slid back his helmet for a precious moment.

Fresh air rushed into his nose and mouth. He took a deep breath, filling his lungs. The air smelled good — thick and moist and rich with the odor of growing plants. He exhaled and took another breath.

To his right a towering column of orange shrubbery rose, wrapped around a sagging concrete pillar. Spread out over the rolling countryside was a vast expanse of grass and trees. In the distance a mass of growth looked like a wall, a jungle of creepers and insects and flowers and underbrush that would have to be blasted as he advanced slowly.

Two immense butterflies danced past him. Great fragile shapes, multicolored, racing erratically around him and then away. Life everywhere — bugs and plants and rustling small animals in the shrubbery, a buzzing jungle of life in every direction. Trent sighed and snapped his helmet back in place. Two breathfuls was all he dared.

He increased the flow of his oxygen tank and then raised his transmitter to his lips. He clicked it briefly on. “Trent. Checking with the Mine Monitor. Hear me?”

A moment of static and silence. Then, a faint, ghostly voice. “Come in, Trent. Where the hell are you?”

“Still going North. Ruins ahead. I may have to bypass. Looks thick.”

“Ruins?”

“New York, probably. I’ll check with the map.”

The voice was eager. “Anything yet?”

“Nothing. Not so far, at least. I’ll circle and report in about an hour.” Trent examined his wristwatch. “It’s half-past three. I’ll raise you before evening.”

The voice hesitated. “Good luck. I hope you find something. How’s your oxygen holding out?”

“All right.”

“Food?”

“Plenty left. I may find some edible plants.”

“Don’t take any chances!”

“I won’t.” Trent clicked off the transmitter and returned it to his belt. “I won’t,” he repeated. He gathered up his blast gun and hoisted his pack and started forward, his heavy lead-lined boots sinking deep into the lush foliage and compost underfoot.

It was just past four o’clock when he saw them. They stepped out of the jungle around him. Two of them, young males — tall and thin and horny

blue-gray like ashes. One raised his hand in greeting. Six or seven fingers — extra joints. “Afternoon,” he piped.

Trent stopped instantly. His heart thudded. “Good afternoon.”

The two youths came slowly around him. One had an ax — a foliage ax. The other carried only his pants and the remains of a canvas shirt. They were nearly eight feet tall. No flesh — bones and hard angles and large, curious eyes, heavily lidded. There were internal changes, radically different metabolism and cell structure, ability to utilize hot salts, altered digestive system. They were both looking at Trent with interest — growing interest.

“Say,” said one. “You’re a human being.”

“That’s right,” Trent said.

“My name’s Jackson.” The youth extended his thin blue horny hand and Trent shook it awkwardly. The hand was fragile under his lead-lined glove. Its owner added, “My friend here is Earl Potter.”

Trent shook hands with Potter. “Greetings,” Potter said. His rough lips twitched. “Can we have a look at your rig?”

“My rig?” Trent countered.

“Your gun and equipment. What’s that on your belt? And that tank?”

“Transmitter — oxygen.” Trent showed them the transmitter. “Battery operated. Hundred-mile range.”

“You’re from a camp?” Jackson asked quickly.

“Yes. Down in Pennsylvania.”

“How many?”

Trent shrugged. “Couple of dozen.”

The blue-skinned giants were fascinated. “How have you survived? Penn was hard hit, wasn’t it? The pools must be deep around there.”

“Mines,” Trent explained. “Our ancestors moved down deep in the coal mines when the War began. So the records have it. We’re fairly well set up. Grow our own food in tanks. A few machines, pumps and compressors and electrical generators. Some hand lathes. Looms.”

He didn’t mention that generators now had to be cranked by hand, that only about half of the tanks were still operative. After three hundred years metal and plastic weren’t much good — in spite of endless patching and repairing. Everything was wearing out, breaking down.

“Say,” Potter said. “This sure makes a fool of Dave Hunter.”

“Dave Hunter?”

“Dave says there aren’t any true humans left,” Jackson explained. He poked at Trent’s helmet curiously. “Why don’t you come back with us? We’ve got a settlement near here — only an hour or so away on the tractor — our hunting tractor. Earl and I were out hunting flap-rabbits.”

“Flap-rabbits?”

“Flying rabbits. Good meat but hard to bring down — weigh about thirty pounds.”

“What do you use? Not the ax surely.”

Potter and Jackson laughed. “Look at this here.” Potter slid a long brass rod from his trousers. It fitted down inside his pants along his pipe-stem leg.

Trent examined the rod. It was tooled by hand. Soft brass, carefully bored and straightened. One end was shaped into a nozzle. He peered down it. A tiny metal pin was lodged in a cake of transparent metal. “How does it work?” he asked.

“Launched by hand — like a blow gun. But once the b-dart is in the air it follows its target forever. The initial thrust has to be provided.” Potter laughed. “I supply that. A big puff of air.”

“Interesting.” Trent returned the rod. With elaborate casualness, studying the two blue-gray faces, he asked, “I’m the first human you’ve seen?”

“That’s right,” Jackson said. “The Old Man will be pleased to welcome you.” There was eagerness in his reedy voice. “What do you say? We’ll take care of you. Feed you, bring you cold plants and animals. For a week, maybe?”

“Sorry,” Trent said. “Other business. If I come through here on the way back…”

The horny faces fell with disappointment. “Not for a little while? Overnight? We’ll pump you plenty of cold food. We have a fine cooler the Old Man fixed up.”

Trent tapped his tank. “Short on oxygen. You don’t have a compressor?”

“No. We don’t have any use. But maybe the Old Man could —”

“Sorry.” Trent moved off. “Have to keep going. You’re sure there are no humans in this region?”

“We thought there weren’t any left anywhere. A rumor once in a while. But you’re the first we’ve seen.” Potter pointed west. “There’s a tribe of

rollers off that way." He pointed vaguely south. "A couple of tribes of bugs."

"And some runners."

"You've seen them?"

"I came that way."

"And north there's some of the underground ones — the blind digging kind." Potter made a face. "I can't see them and their bores and scoops. But what the hell." He grinned. "Everybody has his own way."

"And to the east," Jackson added, "where the ocean begins, there's a lot of the porpoise kind — the undersea type. They swim around — use those big underwater air-domes and tanks — come up sometimes at night. A lot of types come out at night. We're still daylight-oriented." He rubbed his horny blue-gray skin. "This cuts radiation fine."

"I know," Trent said. "So long."

"Good luck." They watched him go, heavy-lidded eyes still big with astonishment, as the human being pushed slowly off through the lush green jungle, his metal and plastic suit glinting faintly in the afternoon sun.

Earth was alive, thriving with activity. Plants and animals and insects in boundless confusion. Night forms, day forms, land and water types, incredible kinds and numbers that had never been catalogued, probably never would be.

By the end of the War every surface inch was radioactive. A whole planet sprayed and bombarded by hard radiation. All life subjected to beta and gamma rays. Most life died — but not all. Hard radiation brought

mutation — at all levels, insects, plant and animal. The normal mutation and selection process was accelerated millions of years in seconds.

These altered progeny littered the Earth. A crawling teeming glowing horde of radiation-saturated beings. In this world, only those forms which could use hot soil and breathe particle-laden air survived. Insects and animals and men who could live in a world with a surface so alive that it glowed at night.

Trent considered this moodily, as he made his way through the steaming jungle, expertly burning creepers and vines with his blaster. Most of the oceans had been vaporized. Water descended still, drenching the land with torrents of hot moisture. This jungle was wet — wet and hot and full of life. Around him creatures scuttled and rustled. He held his blaster tight and pushed on.

The sun was setting. It was getting to be night. A range of ragged hills jutted ahead in the violet gloom. The sunset was going to be beautiful — compounded of particles in suspension, particles that still drifted from the initial blast, centuries ago.

He stopped for a moment to watch. He had come a long way. He was tired — and discouraged.

The horny blue-skinned giants were a typical mutant tribe. *Toads,* they were called. Because of their skin — like desert horned-toads. With their radical internal organs, geared to hot plants and air, they lived easily in a world where he survived only in a lead-lined suit, polarized viewplate, oxygen tank, special cold food pellets grown underground in the Mine.

The Mine — time to call again. Trent lifted his transmitter. “Trent checking again,” he muttered. He licked his dry lips. He was hungry and thirsty. Maybe he could find some relatively cool spot, free of radiation. Take off his suit for a quarter of an hour and wash himself. Get the sweat and grime off.

Two weeks he had been walking, cooped up in a hot sticky lead-lined suit, like a diver's suit. While all around him countless life-forms scrambled and leaped, unbothered by the lethal pools of radiation.

"Mine," the faint tinny voice answered.

"I'm about washed up for today. I'm stopping to rest and eat. No more until tomorrow."

"No luck?" Heavy disappointment.

"None."

Silence. Then, "Well, maybe tomorrow."

"Maybe. Met a tribe of toads. Nice young bucks, eight feet high." Trent's voice was bitter. "Wandering around with nothing on but shirts and pants. Bare feet."

The Mine Monitor was uninterested. "I know. The lucky stiffs. Well, get some sleep and raise me tomorrow am. A report came in from Lawrence."

"Where is he?"

"Due west. Near Ohio. Making good progress."

"Any results?"

"Tribes of rollers, bugs and the digging kind that come up at night — the blind white things."

"Worms."

“Yes, worms. Nothing else. When will you report again?”

“Tomorrow,” Trent said. He cut the switch and dropped his transmitter to his belt.

Tomorrow. He peered into the gathering gloom at the distant range of hills. Five years. And always — tomorrow. He was the last of a great procession of men to be sent out. Lugging precious oxygen tanks and food pellets and a blast pistol. Exhausting their last stores in a useless sortie into the jungles.

Tomorrow? Some tomorrow, not far off, there wouldn’t be any more oxygen tanks and food pellets. The compressors and pumps would have stopped completely. Broken down for good. The Mine would be dead and silent. Unless they made contact pretty damn soon.

He squatted down and began to pass his counter over the surface, looking for a cool spot to undress. He passed out.

“Look at him,” a faint faraway voice said.

Consciousness returned with a rush. Trent pulled himself violently awake, groping for his blaster. It was morning. Gray sunlight filtered down through the trees. Around him shapes moved.

The blaster… gone!

Trent sat up, fully awake. The shapes were vaguely human — but not very. Bugs.

“Where’s my gun?” Trent demanded.

“Take it easy.” A bug advanced, the others behind. It was chilly. Trent shivered. He got awkwardly to his feet as the bugs formed a circle around him. “We’ll give it back.”

“Let’s have it now.” He was stiff and cold. He snapped his helmet in place and tightened his belt. He was shivering, shaking all over. The leaves and vines dripped wet slimy drops. The ground was soft underfoot.

The bugs conferred. There were ten or twelve of them. Strange creatures, more like insects than men. They were shelled — thick shiny chitin. Multi-lensed eyes. Nervous, vibrating antennae by which they detected radiation.

Their protection wasn’t perfect. A strong dose and they were finished. They survived by detection and avoidance and partial immunity. Their food was taken indirectly, first digested by smaller warm-blooded animals and then taken as fecal matter, minus radioactive particles.

“You’re a human,” a bug said. Its voice was shrill and metallic. The bugs were asexual — these, at least. Two other types existed, male drones and a Mother. These were neuter warriors, armed with pistols and foliage axes.

“That’s right,” Trent said.

“What are you doing here? Are there more of you?”

“Quite a few.”

The bugs conferred again, antennae waving wildly. Trent waited. The jungle was stirring into life. He watched a gelatin-like mass flow up the side of a tree and into the branches, a half-digested mammal visible within. Some drab day moths fluttered past. The leaves stirred as underground creatures burrowed silently away from the light.

“Come along with us,” a bug said. It motioned Trent forward. “Let’s get going.”

Trent fell in reluctantly. They marched along a narrow path, cut by axes some time recently. The thick feelers and probes of the jungle were already coming back. “Where are we going?” Trent demanded.

“To the Hill.”

“Why?”

“Never mind.”

Watching the shiny bugs stride along, Trent had trouble believing they had once been human beings. Their ancestors, at least. In spite of their incredible altered physiology the bugs were mentally about the same as he. Their tribal arrangement approximated the human organic states, communism and fascism.

“May I ask you something?” Trent said.

“What?”

“I’m the first human you’ve seen? There aren’t any more around here?”

“No more.”

“Are there reports of human settlements anywhere?”

“Why?”

“Just curious,” Trent said tightly.

“You’re the only one.” The bug was pleased. “We’ll get a bonus for this — for capturing you. There’s a standing reward. Nobody’s ever claimed it before.”

A human was wanted here too. A human brought with him valuable *gnosis*, odds and ends of tradition the mutants needed to incorporate into their shaky social structures. Mutant cultures were still unsteady. They needed contact with the past. A human being was a shaman, a Wise Man to teach and instruct. To teach the mutants how life had been, how their ancestors had lived and acted and looked.

A valuable possession for any tribe — especially if no other humans existed in the region.

Trent cursed savagely. *None?* No others? There *had* to be other humans — some place. If not north, then east. Europe, Asia, Australia. Some place, somewhere on the globe. Humans with tools and machines and equipment. The Mine couldn't be the only settlement, the last fragment of true man. Prized curiosities — doomed when their compressors burned out and their food tanks dried up. If he didn't have any luck pretty soon… The bugs halted, listening. Their antennae twitched suspiciously.

"What is it?" Trent asked.

"Nothing." They started on. "For a moment —"

A flash. The bugs ahead on the trail winked out of existence. A dull roar of light rolled over them.

Trent sprawled. He struggled, caught in the vines and sappy weeds. Around him bugs twisted and fought wildly. Tangling with small furry creatures that fired rapidly and efficiently with hand weapons and, when they got close, kicked and gouged with immense hind legs. Runners.

The bugs were losing. They retreated back down the trail, scattering into the jungle. The runners hopped after them, springing on their powerful hind legs like kangaroos. The last bug departed. The noise died down.

“Okay,” a runner ordered. He gasped for breath, straightening up. “Where’s the human?”

Trent got slowly to his feet. “Here.”

The runners helped him up. They were small, not over four feet high. Fat and round, covered with thick pelts. Little good-natured faces peered up at him with concern. Beady eyes, quivering noses and great kangaroo legs. “You all right?” one asked. He offered Trent his water canteen.

“I’m all right.” Trent pushed the canteen away. “They got my blaster.”

The runners searched around. The blaster was nowhere to be seen.

“Let it go.” Trent shook his head dully, trying to collect himself. “What happened? The light.”

“A grenade.” The runners puffed with pride. “We stretched a wire across the trail, attached to the pin.”

“The bugs control most of this area,” another said. “We have to fight our way through.” Around his neck hung a pair of binoculars. The runners were armed with slug-pistols and knives.

“Are you really a human being?” a runner asked. “The original stock?”

“That’s right,” Trent muttered in unsteady tones.

The runners were awed. Their beady eyes grew wide. They touched his metal suit, his viewplate. His oxygen tank and pack. One squatted down and expertly traced the circuit of his transmitter apparatus.

“Where are you from?” the leader asked in his deep purr-like voice. “You’re the first human we’ve seen in months.”

Trent spun, choking. “Months? Then …”

“None around here. We’re from Canada. Up around Montreal. There’s a human settlement up there.”

Trent’s breath came fast. “Walking distance?”

“Well, we made it in a couple of days. But we go fairly fast.” The runner eyed Trent’s metal-clad legs doubtfully. “I don’t know. For you it would take longer.”

Humans. A human settlement. “How many? A big settlement? Advanced?”

“It’s hard to remember. I saw their settlement once. Down underground — levels, cells. We traded some cold plants for salt. That was a long time ago.”

“They’re operating successfully? They have tools — machinery — compressors? Food tanks to keep going?”

The runner twisted uneasily. “As a matter of fact they may not be there any more.”

Trent froze. Fear cut through him like a knife. “Not there? What do you mean?”

“They may be gone.”

“Gone where?” Trent’s voice was bleak. “What happened to them?”

“I don’t know,” the runner said. “I don’t know what happened to them. Nobody knows.”

He pushed on, hurrying frantically north. The jungle gave way to a bitterly cold fern-like forest. Great silent trees on all sides. The air was thin and brittle.

He was exhausted. And only one tube of oxygen remained in the tank. After that he would have to open his helmet. How long would he last? The first rain cloud would bring lethal particles sweeping into his lungs. Or the first strong wind, blowing from the ocean.

He halted, gasping for breath. He had reached the top of a long slope. At the bottom a plain stretched out — tree-covered — a dark green expanse, almost brown. Here and there a spot of white gleamed. Ruins of some kind. A human city had been here three centuries ago.

Nothing stirred — no sign of life. No sign anywhere.

Trent made his way down the slope. Around him the forest was silent. A dismal oppression hung over everything. Even the usual rustling of small animals was lacking. Animals, insects, men — all were gone. Most of the runners had moved south. The small things probably had died. And the men?

He came out among the ruins. This had been a great city once. Then men had probably gone down in air-raid shelters and mines and subways. Later on they had enlarged their underground chambers. For three centuries men — true men — had held on, living below the surface. Wearing lead-lined suits when they came up, growing food in tanks, filtering their water, compressing particle-free air. Shielding their eyes against the glare of the bright sun.

And now — nothing at all.

He lifted his transmitter. “Mine,” he snapped. “This is Trent.”

The transmitter sputtered feebly. It was a long time before it responded. The voice was faint, distant. Almost lost in the static. “Well? Did you find them?”

“They’re gone.”

“But …”

“Nothing. No one. Completely abandoned.” Trent sat down on a broken stump of concrete. His body was dead. Drained of life. “They were here recently. The ruins aren’t covered. They must have left in the last few weeks.”

“It doesn’t make sense. Mason and Douglas are on their way. Douglas has the tractor car. He should be there in a couple of days. How long will your oxygen last?”

“Twenty-four hours.”

“We’ll tell him to make time.”

“I’m sorry I don’t have more to report. Something better.” Bitterness welled up in his voice. “After all these years. They were here all this time. And now that we’ve finally got to them…”

“Any clues? Can you tell what became of them?”

“I’ll look.” Trent got heavily to his feet. “If I find anything I’ll report.”

“Good luck.” The faint voice faded off into static. “We’ll be waiting.”

Trent returned the transmitter to his belt. He peered up at the gray sky. Evening — almost night. The forest was bleak and ominous. A faint blanket of snow was falling silently over the brown growth, hiding it under a layer

of grimy white. Snow mixed with particles. Lethal dust — still falling, after three hundred years.

He switched on his helmet-beam. The beam cut a pale swath ahead of him through the trees, among the ruined columns of concrete, the occasional heaps of rusted slag. He entered the ruins.

In their center he found the towers and installations. Great pillars laced with mesh scaffolding — still bright. Open tunnels from underground lay like black pools. Silent deserted tunnels. He peered down one, flashing his helmet beam into it. The tunnel went straight down, deep into the heart of the Earth. But it was empty.

Where had they gone? What had happened to them? Trent wandered around dully. Human beings had lived here, worked here, survived. They had come up to the surface. He could see the bore-nosed cars parked among the towers, now gray with the night snow. They had come up and then — gone.

Where?

He sat down in the shelter of a ruined column and flicked on his heater. His suit warmed up, a slow red glow that made him feel better. He examined his counter. The area was hot. If he intended to eat and drink he'd have to move on.

He was tired. Too damn tired to move on. He sat resting, hunched over in a heap, his helmet-beam lighting up a circle of gray snow ahead of him. Over him the snow fell silently. Presently he was covered, a gray lump sitting among the ruined concrete. As silent and unmoving as the towers and scaffolding around him.

He dozed. His heater hummed gently. Around him a wind came up, swirling the snow, blowing it up against him. He slid forward a little until his metal and plastic helmet came to rest against the concrete.

Towards midnight he woke up. He straightened, suddenly alert. Something — a noise. He listened.

Far off, a dull roaring.

Douglas in the car? No, not yet — not for another two days. He stood up, snow pouring off him. The roar was growing, getting louder. His heart began to hammer wildly. He peered around, his beam flashing through the night.

The ground shook, vibrating through him, rattling his almost empty oxygen tank. He gazed up at the sky — and gasped.

A glowing trail slashed over the sky, igniting the early morning darkness. A deep red, swelling each second. He watched it, open-mouthed.

Something was coming down — landing.

A rocket.

The long metal hull glittered in the morning sun. Men were working busily, loading supplies and equipment. Tunnel cars raced up and down, hauling material from the undersurface levels to the waiting ship. The men worked carefully and efficiently, each in his metal-and-plastic suit, in his carefully sealed lead-lined protection shield.

“How many back at your Mine?” Norris asked quietly.

“About thirty.” Trent’s eyes were on the ship. “Thirty-three, including all those out.”

“Out?”

“Looking. Like me. A couple are on their way here. They should arrive soon. Late today or tomorrow.”

Norris made some notes on his chart. “We can handle about fifteen with this load. We’ll catch the rest next time. They can hold out another week?”

“Yes.”

Norris eyed him curiously. “How did you find us? This is a long way from Pennsylvania. We’re making our last stop. If you had come a couple days later…”

“Some runners sent me this way. They said you had gone they didn’t know where.”

Norris laughed. “We didn’t know where either.”

“You must be taking all this stuff some place. This ship. It’s old, isn’t it? Fixed up.”

“Originally it was some kind of bomb. We located it and repaired it — worked on it from time to time. We weren’t sure what we wanted to do. We’re not sure yet. But we know we have to leave.”

“Leave? Leave Earth?”

“Of course.” Norris motioned him toward the ship. They made their way up the ramp to one of the hatches. Norris pointed back down. “Look down there — at the men loading.”

The men were almost finished. The last cars were half empty, bringing up the final remains from underground. Books, records, pictures, artifacts — the remains of a culture. A multitude of representative objects, shot into the hold of the ship to be carried off, away from Earth. “Where?” Trent asked.

“To Mars for the time being. But we’re not staying there. We’ll probably go on out, towards the moons of Jupiter and Saturn. Ganymede may turn out to be something. If not Ganymede, one of the others. If worse comes to worst we can stay on Mars. It’s pretty dry and barren but it’s not radioactive.”

“There’s no chance here — no possibility of reclaiming the radioactive areas? If we could cool off Earth, neutralize the hot clouds and —”

“If we did that,” Norris said, “they’d all die.”

“They?”

“Rollers, runners, worms, toads, bugs, all the rest. The endless varieties of life. Countless forms adapted to *this* Earth — this hot Earth. These plants and animals use the radioactive metals. Essentially the new basis of life here is an assimilation of hot metallic salts. Salts which are utterly lethal to us.”

“But even so —”

“Even so, it’s not really our world.”

“We’re the true humans,” Trent said.

“Not any more. Earth is alive, teeming with life. Growing wildly — in all directions. We’re one form, an old form. To live here, we’d have to restore the old conditions, the old factors, the balance as it was three hundred and fifty years ago. A colossal job. And if we succeeded, if we managed to cool Earth, none of this would remain.”

Norris pointed at the great brown forest. And beyond it, towards the south, at the beginning of the steaming jungle that continued all the way to the Straits of Magellan.

“In a way it’s what we deserve. *We* brought the War. *We* changed Earth. Not destroyed — *changed*. Made it so different we can’t live here any longer.”

Norris indicated the lines of helmeted men. Men sheathed in lead, in heavy protection suits, covered with layers of metal and wiring, counters, oxygen tanks, shields, food pellets, filtered water. The men worked, sweated in their heavy suits. “See them? What do they resemble?”

A worker came up, gasping and panting. For a brief second he lifted his viewplate and took a hasty breath of air. He slammed his plate and nervously locked it in place. “Ready to go, sir. All loaded.”

“Change of plan,” Norris said. “We’re going to wait until this man’s companions get here. Their camp is breaking up. Another day won’t make any difference.”

“All right, sir.” The worker pushed off, climbing back down to the surface, a weird figure in his heavy lead-lined suit and bulging helmet and intricate gear.

“We’re visitors,” Norris told him.

Trent flinched violently. *“What?”*

“Visitors on a strange planet. Look at us. Shielded suits and helmets, spacesuits — for exploring. We’re a rocketship stopping at an alien world on which we can’t survive. Stopping for a brief period to load up — and then take off again.”

“Closed helmets,” Trent said, in a strange voice.

“Closed helmets. Lead shields. Counters and special food and water. Look over there.”

A small group of runners were standing together, gazing up in awe at the great gleaming ship. Off to the right, visible among the trees, was a runner village. Checker-board crops and animal pens and board houses.

“The natives,” Norris said. “The inhabitants of the planet. They can breathe the air, drink the water, eat the plant-life. We can’t. This is their planet — not ours. They can live here, build up a society.”

“I hope we can come back.”

“Back?”

“To visit — some time.”

Norris smiled ruefully. “I hope so too. But we’ll have to get permission from the inhabitants — permission to land.” His eyes were bright with amusement — and, abruptly, pain. A sudden agony that gleamed out over everything else. “We’ll have to ask them if it’s all right. And they may say *no.* They may not want us.”

Small Town

Verne Haskel crept miserably up the front steps of his house, his overcoat dragging behind him. He was tired. Tired and discouraged. And his feet ached.

“My God,” Madge exclaimed, as he closed the door and peeled off his coat and hat. “You home already?”

Haskel dumped his briefcase and began untying his shoes. His body sagged. His face was drawn and gray.

“Say something!”

“Dinner ready?”

“No, dinner isn’t ready. What’s wrong this time? Another fight with Larson?”

Haskel stumped into the kitchen and filled a glass with warm water and soda. “Let’s move,” he said.

“Move?”

“Away from Woodland. To San Francisco. Anywhere.” Haskel drank his soda, his middle-aged flabby body supported by the gleaming sink. “I feel lousy. Maybe I ought to see Doc Barnes again. I wish this was Friday and tomorrow was Saturday.”

“What do you want for dinner?”

“Nothing. I don’t know.” Haskel shook his head wearily. “Anything.” He sank down at the kitchen table. “All I want is rest. Open a can of stew.

Pork and beans. Anything.”

“I suggest we go out to Don’s Steakhouse. On Monday they have good sirloins.”

“No. I’ve seen enough human faces today.”

“I suppose you’re too tired to drive me over to Helen Grant’s.”

“The car’s in the garage. Busted again.”

“If you took better care of it —”

“What the hell do you want me to do? Carry it around in a cellophane bag?”

“Don’t shout at me, Verne Haskel!” Madge flushed with anger. “Maybe you want to fix your own dinner.”

Haskel got wearily to his feet. He shuffled toward the cellar door. “I’ll see you.”

“Where are you going?”

“Downstairs in the basement.”

“Oh, Lord!” Madge cried wildly. “Those trains! Those toys! How can a grown man, a middle-aged man —”

Haskel said nothing. He was already half way down the stairs, feeling around for the basement light.

The basement was cool and moist. Haskel took his engineer's cap from the hook and fitted it on his head. Excitement and a faint surge of renewed energy filled his tired body. He approached the great plywood table with eager steps.

Trains ran everywhere. Along the floor, under the coal bin, among the steam pipes of the furnace. The tracks converged at the table, rising up on carefully graded ramps. The table itself was littered with transformers and signals and switches and heaps of equipment and wiring. And — And the town.

The detailed, painfully accurate model of Woodland. Every tree and house, every store and building and street and fireplug. A minute town, each facet in perfect order. Constructed with elaborate care throughout the years. As long as he could remember. Since he was a kid, building and glueing and working after school.

Haskel turned on the main transformer. All along the track signal lights glowed. He fed power to the heavy Lionel engine parked with its load of freight cars. The engine sped smoothly into life, gliding along the track. A flashing dark projectile of metal that made his breath catch in his throat. He opened an electric switch and the engine headed down the ramp, through a tunnel and off the table. It raced under the workbench.

His trains. And his town. Haskel bent over the miniature houses and streets, his heart glowing with pride. He had built it — himself. Every inch. Every perfect inch. The whole town. He touched the corner of Fred's Grocery Store. Not a detail lacking. Even the windows. The displays of food. The signs. The counters.

The Uptown Hotel. He ran his hand over its flat roof. The sofas and chairs in the lobby. He could see them through the window.

Green's Drugstore. Bunion pad displays. Magazines. Frazier's Auto Parts. Mexico City Dining. Sharpstein's Apparel. Bob's Liquor Store. Ace Billiard Parlor.

The whole town. He ran his hands over it. He had built it; the town was his.

The train came rushing back, out from under the workbench. Its wheels passed over an automatic switch and a drawbridge lowered itself obediently. The train swept over and beyond, dragging its cars behind it.

Haskel turned up the power. The train gained speed. Its whistle sounded. It turned a sharp curve and grated across a cross-track. More speed. Haskel's hands jerked convulsively at the transformer. The train leaped and shot ahead. It swayed and bucked as it shot around a curve. The transformer was turned up to maximum. The train was a clattering blur of speed, rushing along the track, across bridges and switches, behind the big pipes of the floor furnace.

It disappeared into the coal bin. A moment later it swept out the other side, rocking wildly.

Haskel slowed the train down. He was breathing hard, his chest rising painfully. He sat down on the stool by the workbench and lit a cigarette with shaking fingers.

The train, the model town, gave him a strange feeling. It was hard to explain. He had always loved trains, model engines and signals and buildings. Since he was a little kid, maybe six or seven. His father had given him his first train. An engine and a few pieces of track. An old wind-up train. When he was nine he got his first real electric train. And two switches.

He added to it, year after year. Track, engines, switches, cars, signals. More powerful transformers. And the beginnings of the town.

He had built the town up carefully. Piece by piece. First, when he was in junior high, a model of the Southern Pacific Depot. Then the taxi stand next

door. The cafe where the drivers ate. Broad Street.

And so on. More and more. Houses, buildings, stores. A whole town, growing under his hands, as the years went by. Every afternoon he came home from school and worked. Glued and cut and painted and sawed.

Now it was virtually complete. Almost done. He was forty-three years old and the town was almost done.

Haskel moved around the big plywood table, his hands extended reverently. He touched a miniature store here and there. The flower shop. The theater. The Telephone Company. Larson's Pump and Valve Works.

That, too. Where he worked. His place of business. A perfect miniature of the plant, down to the last detail.

Haskel scowled. Jim Larson. For twenty years he had worked there, slaved day after day. For what? To see others advanced over him. Younger men. Favorites of the boss. Yes-men with bright ties and pressed pants and wide, stupid grins.

Misery and hatred welled up in Haskel. All his life Woodland had got the better of him. He had never been happy. The town had always been against him. Miss Murphy in high school. The frats in college. Clerks in the snooty department stores. His neighbors. Cops and mailmen and bus drivers and delivery boys. Even his wife. Even Madge.

He had never meshed with the town. The rich, expensive little suburb of San Francisco, down the peninsula beyond the fog belt. Woodland was too damn upper-middle class. Too many big houses and lawns and chrome cars and deck chairs. Too stuffy and sleek. As long as he could remember. In school. His job — Larson. The Pump and Valve Works. Twenty years of hard work.

Haskel's fingers closed over the tiny building, the model of the Larson's Pump and Valve Works. Savagely, he ripped it loose and threw it to the floor. He crushed it underfoot, grinding the bits of glass and metal and cardboard into a shapeless mass.

God, he was shaking all over. He stared down at the remains, his heart pounding wildly. Strange emotions, crazy emotions, twisted through him. Thoughts he never had had before. For a long time he gazed down at the crumpled wad by his hose. What had once been the model of Larson's Pump and Valve Works.

Abruptly he pulled away. In a trance he returned to his workbench and sat stiffly down on the stool. He pulled his tools and materials together, clicking the power drill on.

It took only a few moments. Working rapidly, with quick, expert fingers, Haskel assembled a new model. He painted, glued, fitted pieces together. He lettered a microscopic sign and sprayed a green lawn into place.

Then he carried the new model carefully over to the table and glued it in the correct spot. The place where Larson's Pump and Valve Works had been. The new building gleamed in the overhead light, still moist and shiny.

WOODLAND MORTUARY

Haskel rubbed his hands in an ecstasy of satisfaction. The Valve Works was gone. He had destroyed it. Obliterated it. Removed it from the town. Below him was Woodland — without the Valve Works. A mortuary instead.

His eyes gleamed. His lips twitched. His surging emotions swelled. He had got rid of it. In a brief flurry of action. In a second. The whole thing was simple — amazingly easy.

Odd he hadn't thought of it before.

Sipping a tall glass of ice-cold beer thoughtfully, Madge Haskel said, "There's something wrong with Verne. I noticed it especially last night.

When he came home from work.”

Doctor Paul Tyler grunted absently. “A highly neurotic type. Sense of inferiority. Withdrawal and introversion.”

“But he’s getting worse. Him and his trains. Those damn model trains. My God, Paul! Do you know he has a whole town down there in the basement?”

Tyler was curious. “Really? I never knew that.”

“All the time I’ve known him he’s had them down there. Started when he was a kid. Imagine a grown man playing with trains! It’s — it’s disgusting. Every night the same thing.”

“Interesting.” Tyler rubbed his jaw. “He keeps at them continually? An unvarying pattern?”

“Every night. Last night he didn’t even eat dinner. He just came home and went directly down.”

Paul Tyler’s polished features twisted into a frown. Across from him Madge sat languidly sipping her beer. It was two in the afternoon. The day was warm and bright. The livingroom was attractive in a lazy, quiet way. Abruptly Tyler got to his feet. “Let’s take a look at them. The models. I didn’t know it had gone so far.”

“Do you really want to?” Madge slid back the sleeve of her green silk lounge pajamas and consulted her wristwatch. “He won’t be home until five.” She jumped to her feet, setting down her glass. “All right. We have time.”

“Fine. Let’s go down.” Tyler caught hold of Madge’s arm and they hurried down into the basement, a strange excitement flooding through

them. Madge clicked on the basement light and they approached the big plywood table, giggling and nervous, like mischievous children.

“See?” Madge said, squeezing Tyler’s arm. “Look at it. Took years. All his life.”

Tyler nodded slowly. “Must have.” There was awe in his voice. “I’ve never seen anything like it. The detail… He has skill.”

“Yes, Verne is good with his hands.” Madge indicated the workbench. “He buys tools all the time.”

Tyler walked slowly around the big table, bending over and peering. “Amazing. Every building. The whole town is here. Look! There’s my place.”

He indicated his luxurious apartment building, a few blocks from the Haskel residence.

“I guess it’s all there,” Madge said. “Imagine a grown man coming down here and playing with model trains!”

“Power.” Tyler pushed an engine along a track. “That’s why it appeals to boys. Trains are big things. Huge and noisy. Powersex symbols. The boy sees the train rushing along the track. It’s so huge and ruthless it scares him. Then he gets a toy train. A model, like these. He controls it. Makes it start, stop. Go slow. Fast. He runs it. It responds to him.”

Madge shivered. “Let’s go upstairs where it’s warm. It’s so cold down here.”

“But as the boy grows up, he gets bigger and stronger. He can shed the model-symbol. Master the real object, the real train. Get genuine control over things. Valid mastery.” Tyler shook his head. “Not this substitute thing.

Unusual, a grown person going to such lengths." He frowned. "I never noticed a mortuary on State Street."

"A mortuary?"

"And this, Steuben Pet Shop. Next door to the radio repair shop. There's no pet shop there." Tyler cudgeled his brain. "What *is* there? Next to the radio repair place."

"Paris Furs." Madge clasped her arms. "Brrrrr. Come on, Paul. Let's go upstairs before I freeze."

Tyler laughed. "Okay, sissy." He headed toward the stairs, frowning again. "I wonder why. Steuben Pets. Never heard of it. Everything is so detailed. He must know the town by heart. To put a shop there that isn't —" He clicked off the basement light. "And the mortuary. What's supposed to be there? Isn't the —"

"Forget it," Madge called back, hurrying past him, into the warm livingroom. "You're practically as bad as he is. Men are such children."

Tyler didn't respond. He was deep in thought. His suave confidence was gone; he looked nervous and shaken.

Madge pulled the Venetian blinds down. The livingroom sank into amber gloom. She flopped down on the couch and pulled Tyler down beside her. "Stop looking like that," she ordered. "I've never seen you this way." Her slim arms circled his neck and her lips brushed close to his ear. "I wouldn't have let you in if I thought you were going to worry about *him.*"

Tyler grunted, preoccupied. "Why *did* you let me in?"

The pressure of Madge's arms increased. Her silk pajamas rustled as she moved against him. "Silly," she said.

Big red-headed Jim Larson gaped in disbelief. “What do you mean? What’s the matter with you?”

“I’m quitting.” Haskel shoveled the contents of his desk into his briefcase. “Mail the check to my house.”

“But —”

“Get out of the way.” Haskel pushed past Larson, out into the hall. Larson was stunned with amazement. There was a fixed expression on Haskel’s face. A glazed look. A rigid look Larson had never seen before.

“Are you — all right?” Larson asked.

“Sure.” Haskel opened the front door of the plant and disappeared outside. The door slammed after him. “Sure I’m all right,” he muttered to himself. He made his way through the crowds of late-afternoon shoppers, his lips twitching. “You’re damn right I’m all right.”

“Watch it, buddy,” a laborer muttered ominously, as Haskel shoved past him.

“Sorry.” Haskel hurried on, gripping his briefcase. At the top of the hill he paused a moment to get his breath. Behind him was Larson’s Pump and Valve Works. Haskel laughed shrilly. Twenty years — cut short in a second. It was over. No more Larson. No more dull, grinding job, day after day. Without promotion or future. Routine and boredom, months on end. It was over and done for. A new life and beginning.

He hurried on. The sun was setting. Cars streaked by him, businessmen going home from work. Tomorrow they would be going back — but not him. Not ever again.

He reached his own street. Ed Tildon’s house rose up, a great stately structure of concrete and glass. Tildon’s dog came rushing out to bark. Haskel hastened past. Tildon’s dog. He laughed wildly.

“Better keep away!” he shouted at the dog. He reached his own house and leaped up the front steps two at a time. He tore the door open. The livingroom was dark and silent. There was a sudden stir of motion. Shapes untangling themselves, getting quickly up from the couch. “Verne!” Madge gasped. “What are you doing home so early?” Verne Haskel threw his briefcase down and dropped his hat and coat over a chair. His lined face was twisted with emotion, pulled out of shape by violent inner forces.

“What in the world!” Madge fluttered, hurrying toward him nervously, smoothing down her lounge pajamas. “Has something happened? I didn’t expect you so —” She broke off, blushing. “I mean, I —”

Paul Tyler strolled leisurely toward Haskel. “Hi there, Verne,” he murmured, embarrassed. “Dropped by to say hello and return a book to your wife.”

Haskel nodded curtly. “Afternoon.” He turned and headed toward the basement door, ignoring the two of them. “I’ll be downstairs.”

“But Verne!” Madge protested. “What’s happened?”

Verne halted briefly at the door. “I quit my job.”

“You *what?”*

“I quit my job. I finished Larson off. There won’t be any more of him.” The basement door slammed.

“Good Lord!” Madge shrieked, clutching at Tyler hysterically. “He’s gone out of his mind!”

Down in the basement, Verne Haskel snapped on the light impatiently. He put on his engineer's cap and pulled his stool up beside the great plywood table.

What next?

Morris Home Furnishings. The big plush store. Where the clerks all looked down their noses at him.

He rubbed his hands gleefully. No more of them. No more snooty clerks, lifting their eyebrows when he came in. Only hair and bow ties and folded handkerchiefs.

He removed the model of Morris Home Furnishings and disassembled it. He worked feverishly, with frantic haste. Now that he had really begun he wasted no time. A moment later he was glueing two small buildings in its place. Ritz Shoeshine. Pete's Bowling Alley.

Haskel giggled excitedly. Fitting extinction for the luxurious, exclusive furniture store. A shoeshine parlor and a bowling alley. Just what it deserved.

The California State Bank. He had always hated the Bank. They had once refused him a loan. He pulled the Bank loose.

Ed Tildon's mansion. His damn dog. The dog had bit him on the ankle one afternoon. He ripped the model off. His head spun. He could do anything.

Harrison Appliance. They had sold him a bum radio. Off came Harrison Appliance.

Joe's Cigar and Smoke Shop. Joe had given him a lead quarter in May, 1949. Off came Joe's.

The Ink Works. He loathed the smell of ink. Maybe a bread factory, instead. He loved baking bread. Off came the Ink Works.

Elm Street was too dark at night. A couple of times he had stumbled. A few more streetlights were in order.

Not enough bars along High Street. Too many dress shops and expensive hat and fur shops and ladies' apparel. He ripped a whole handful loose and carried them to the workbench.

At the top of the stairs the door opened slowly. Madge peered down, pale and frightened. "Verne?"

He scowled up impatiently. "What do you want?"

Madge came downstairs hesitantly. Behind her Doctor Tyler followed, suave and handsome in his gray suit. "Verne — is everything all right?"

"Of course."

"Did — did you really quit your job?"

Haskel nodded. He began to disassemble the Ink Works, ignoring his wife and Doctor Tyler. "But *why?"*

Haskel grunted impatiently. "No time."

Doctor Tyler had begun to look worried. "Do I understand you're too busy for your job?"

"That's right."

"Too busy doing *what?"* Tyler's voice rose; he was trembling nervously. "Working down here on this town of yours? Changing things?"

“Go away,” Haskel muttered. His deft hands were assembling a lovely little Langendorf Bread Factory. He shaped it with loving care, sprayed it with white paint, brushed a gravel walk and shrubs in front of it. He put it aside and began on a park. A big green park. Woodland had always needed a park. It would go in place of State Street Hotel.

Tyler pulled Madge away from the table, off in a corner of the basement. “Good God.” He lit a cigarette shakily. The cigarette flipped out of his hands and rolled away. He ignored it and fumbled for another. “You see? You see what he’s doing?”

Madge shook her head mutely. “What is it? I don’t —”

“How long has he been working on this? All his life?”

Madge nodded, white-faced. “Yes, all his life.”

Tyler’s features twisted. “My God, Madge. It’s enough to drive you out of your mind. I can hardly believe it. We’ve got to do something.”

“What’s happening?” Madge moaned. “What —”

“He’s losing himself into it.” Tyler’s face was a mask of incredulous disbelief. “Faster and faster.”

“He’s always come down here,” Madge faltered. “It’s nothing new. He’s always wanted to get away.”

“Yes. Get away.” Tyler shuddered, clenched his fists and pulled himself together. He advanced across the basement and stopped by Verne Haskel.

“What do you want?” Haskel muttered, noticing him.

Tyler licked his lips. “You’re adding some things, aren’t you? New buildings.”

Haskel nodded.

Tyler touched the little bread factory with shaking fingers. “What’s this? Bread? Where does it go?” He moved around the table. “I don’t remember any bread factory in Woodland.” He whirled. “You aren’t by any chance *improving* on the town? Fixing it up here and there?”

“Get the hell out of here,” Haskel said, with ominous calm. “Both of you.”

“Verne!” Madge squeaked.

“I’ve got a lot to do. You can bring sandwiches down about eleven. I hope to finish sometime tonight.”

“Finish?” Tyler asked.

“Finish,” Haskel answered, returning to his work.

“Come on, Madge.” Tyler grabbed her and pulled her to the stairs. “Let’s get out of here.” He strode ahead of her, up to the stairs and into the hall. “Come on!” As soon as she was up he closed the door tightly after them.

Madge dabbed at her eyes hysterically. “He’s gone crazy, Paul! What’ll we do?”

Tyler was in deep thought. “Be quiet. I have to think this out.” He paced back and forth, a hard scowl on his features. “It’ll come soon. It won’t be long, not at this rate. Sometime tonight.”

“What? What do you mean?”

“His withdrawal. Into his substitute world. The improved model he controls. Where he can get away.”

“Isn’t there something we can do?”

“Do?” Tyler smiled faintly. “Do we want to do something?”

Madge gasped. “But we can’t just —”

“Maybe this will solve our problem. This may be what we’ve been looking for.” Tyler eyed Mrs Haskel thoughtfully. “This may be just the thing.”

It was after midnight, almost two o’clock in the morning, when he began to get things into final shape. He was tired — but alert. Things were happening fast. The job was almost done.

Virtually perfect.

He halted work a moment, surveying what he had accomplished. The town had been radically changed. About ten o’clock he had begun basic structural alterations in the layout of the streets. He had removed most of the public buildings, the civic center and the sprawling business district around it.

He had erected a new city hall, police station, and an immense park with fountains and indirect lighting. He had cleared the slum area, the old run-down stores and houses and streets. The streets were wider and well-lit. The houses were now small and clean. The stores modern and attractive — without being ostentatious.

All advertising signs had been removed. Most of the filling stations were gone. The immense factory area was gone, too. Rolling countryside took its place. Trees and hills and green grass.

The wealthy district had been altered. There were now only a few of the mansions left — belonging to persons he looked favorably on. The rest had been cut down, turned into uniform two-bedroom dwellings, one story, with a single garage each.

The city hall was no longer an elaborate, rococo structure. Now it was low and simple, modeled after the Parthenon, a favorite of his.

There were ten or twelve persons who had done him special harm. He had altered their houses considerably. Given them war-time housing unit apartments, six to a building, at the far edge of town. Where the wind came off the bay, carrying the smell of decaying mud-flats.

Jim Larson's house was completely gone. He had erased Larson utterly. He no longer existed, not in this new Woodland — which was now almost complete.

Almost. Haskel studied his work intently. All the changes had to be made *now.* Not later. This was the time of creation. Later, when it had been finished, it could not be altered. He had to catch all the necessary changes now — or forget them.

The new Woodland looked pretty good. Clean and neat — and simple. The rich district had been toned down. The poor district had been improved. Glaring ads, signs, displays, had all been changed or removed. The business community was smaller. Parks and countryside took the place of factories. The civic center was lovely.

He added a couple of playgrounds for smaller kids. A small theater instead of the enormous Uptown with its flashing neon sign. After some consideration he removed most of the bars he had previously constructed. The new Woodland was going to be moral. Extremely moral. Few bars, no billiards, no red light district. And there was an especially fine jail for undesirables.

The most difficult part had been the microscopic lettering of the main office door of the city hall. He had left it until last, and then painted the words with agonizing care:

MAYOR VERNON R. HASKEL

A few last changes. He gave the Edwardses a ‘39 Plymouth instead of a new Cadillac. He added more trees in the downtown district. One more fire department. One less dress shop. He had never liked taxis. On impulse, he removed the taxi stand and put in a flower shop.

Haskel rubbed his hands. Anything more? Or was it complete… Perfect… He studied each part intently. What had he overlooked?

The high school. He removed it and put in two smaller high schools, one at each end of town. Another hospital. That took almost half an hour. He was getting tired. His hands were less swift. He mopped his forehead shakily. Anything else? He sat down on his stool wearily, to rest and think.

All done. It was complete. Joy welled up in him. A bursting cry of happiness. His work was over. “Finished!” Verne Haskel shouted.

He got unsteadily to his feet. He closed his eyes, held his arms out, and advanced toward the plywood table. Reaching, grasping, fingers extended, Haskel headed toward it, a look of radiant exaltation on his seamed, middle-aged face.

Upstairs, Tyler and Madge heard the shout. A distant booming that rolled through the house in waves. Madge winced in terror. “What was that?”

Tyler listened intently. He heard Haskel moving below them, in the basement. Abruptly, he stubbed out his cigarette. “I think it’s happened. Sooner than I expected.”

“It? You mean he’s —”

Tyler got quickly to his feet. “He’s gone, Madge. Into his other world. We’re finally free.”

Madge caught his arm. “Maybe we’re making a mistake. It’s so terrible. Shouldn’t we — try to do something? Bring him out of it — try to pull him back.”

“Bring him back?” Tyler laughed nervously. “I don’t think we could, now. Even if we wanted to. It’s too late.” He hurried toward the basement door. “Come on.”

“It’s horrible.” Madge shuddered and followed reluctantly. “I wish we had never got started.”

Tyler halted briefly at the door. “Horrible? He’s happier where he is now. And you’re happier. The way it was, nobody was happy. This is the best thing.”

He opened the basement door. Madge followed him. They moved cautiously down the stairs, into the dark, silent basement, damp with the faint night mists. The basement was empty.

Tyler relaxed. He was overcome with dazed relief. “He’s gone. Everything’s okay. It worked out exactly right.”

“But I don’t understand,” Madge repeated hopelessly, as Tyler’s Buick purred along the dark, deserted streets. “Where did he go?”

“You know where he went,” Tyler answered. “Into his substitute world, of course.” He screeched around a corner on two wheels. “The rest should be fairly simple. A few routine forms. There really isn’t much left, now.”

The night was frigid and bleak. No lights showed, except an occasional lonely streetlamp. Far off, a train whistle sounded mournfully, a dismal echo. Rows of silent houses flickered by on both sides of them.

“Where are we going?” Madge asked. She sat huddled against the door, face pale with shock and terror, shivering under her coat.

“To the police station.”

“Why?”

“To report him, naturally. So they’ll know he’s gone. We’ll have to wait; it’ll be several years before he’ll be declared legally dead.” Tyler reached over and hugged her briefly. “We’ll make out in the meantime, I’m sure.”

“What if — they find him?”

Tyler shook his head angrily. He was still tense, on edge. “Don’t you understand? They’ll never find him — he doesn’t exist. At least, not in our world. He’s in his own world. You saw it. The model. The improved substitute.”

“He’s there?”

“All his life he’s worked on it. Built it up. Made it real. He brought that world into being — and now he’s in it. That’s what he wanted. That’s why he built it. He didn’t merely dream about an escape world. He actually constructed it — every bit and piece. Now he’s warped himself right out of our world, into it. Out of our lives.”

Madge finally began to understand. “Then he really *did* lose himself in his substitute world. You meant that, what you said about him — getting away.”

“It took me awhile to realize it. The mind constructs reality. Frames it. Creates it. We all have a common reality, a common dream. But Haskel turned his back on our common reality and created his own. And he had a unique capacity — far beyond the ordinary. He devoted his whole life, his whole skill to building it. He’s there now.”

Tyler hesitated and frowned. He gripped the wheel tightly and increased speed. The Buick hissed along the dark street, through the silent, unmoving bleakness that was the town.

“There’s only one thing,” he continued presently. “One thing I don’t understand.”

“What is it?”

“The model. It was also gone. I assumed he’d — shrink, I suppose. Merge with it. But the model’s gone, too.” Tyler shrugged. “It doesn’t matter.” He peered into the darkness. “We’re almost there. This is Elm.”

It was then Madge screamed. *“Look!”*

To the right of the car was a small, neat building. And a sign. The sign was easily visible in the darkness.

WOODLAND MORTUARY

Madge was sobbing in horror. The car roared forward, automatically guided by Tyler’s numb hands. Another sign flashed by briefly, as they coasted up before the city hall.

STEUBEN PET SHOP

The city hall was lit by recessed, hidden illumination. A low, simple building, a square of glowing white. Like a marble Greek temple.

Tyler pulled the car to a halt. Then suddenly shrieked and started up again. But not soon enough.

The two shiny-black police cars came silently up around the Buick, one on each side. The four stern cops already had their hands on the door. Stepping out and coming toward him, grim and efficient.

Souvenir

“Here we go, sir,” the robot pilot said. The words startled Rogers and made him look up sharply. He tensed his body and adjusted the trace web inside his coat as the bubble ship started dropping, swiftly and silently, toward the planet’s surface.

This — his heart caught — was Williamson’s World. The legendary lost planet — found, after three centuries. By accident, of course. This blue and green planet, the holy grail of the Galactic System, had been almost miraculously discovered by a routine charting mission.

Frank Williamson had been the first Terran to develop an outer-space drive — the first to hop from the Solar System toward the universe beyond. He had never come back. He — his world, his colony — had never been found. There had been endless rumors, false leads, fake legends — and nothing more.

“I’m receiving field clearance.” The robot pilot raised the gain on the control speaker, and clicked to attention.

“Field ready,” came a ghostly voice from below. “Remember, your drive mechanism is unfamiliar to us. How much run is required? Emergency brake-walls are up.”

Rogers smiled. He could hear the pilot telling them that no run would be required. Not with this ship. The brake-walls could be lowered with perfect safety.

Three hundred years! It had taken a long time to find Williamson’s World. Many authorities had given him up. Some believed he had never landed, had died out in space. Perhaps there was *no* Williamson’s World. Certainly there had been no real clues, nothing tangible to go on. Frank

Williamson and three families had utterly disappeared in the trackless void, never to be heard from again.

Until now…

The young man met him at the field. He was thin and red-haired and dressed in a colorful suit of bright material. “You’re from the Galactic Relay Center?” he asked.

“That’s right,” Rogers said huskily. “I’m Edward Rogers.”

The young man held out his hand. Rogers shook it awkwardly. “My name is Williamson,” the young man said. “Gene Williamson.”

The name thundered in Rogers’ ears. “Are you —”

The young man nodded, his gaze enigmatical. “I’m his great-great-great-great-grandson. His tomb is here. You may see it, if you wish.”

“I almost expected to see him. He’s — well, almost a god-figure to us. The first man to break out of the Solar System.”

“He means a lot to us, too,” the young man said. “He brought us here. They searched a long time before they found a planet that was habitable.” Williamson waved at the city stretched out beyond the field. “This one proved satisfactory. It’s the System’s tenth planet.”

Rogers’ eyes began to shine. Williamson’s World. Under his feet. He stamped hard as they walked down the ramp together, away from the field. How many men in the Galaxy had dreamed of striding down a landing ramp onto Williamson’s World with a young descendant of Frank Williamson beside them?

“They’ll all want to come here,” Williamson said, as if aware of his thoughts. “Throw rubbish around and break off the flowers. Pick up

handfuls of dirt to take back." He laughed a little nervously. "The Relay will control them, of course."

"Of course," Rogers assured him.

At the ramp-end Rogers stopped short. For the first time he saw the city.

"What's wrong?" Gene Williamson asked, with a faint trace of amusement.

They had been cut off, of course. Isolated — so perhaps it wasn't so surprising. It was a wonder they weren't living in caves, eating raw meat. But Williamson had always symbolized progress — development. He had been a man *ahead* of other men.

True, his space-drive by modern standards had been primitive, a curiosity. But the concept remained unaltered; Williamson the pioneer, and inventor. The man who built.

Yet the city was nothing more than a village, with a few dozen houses, and some public buildings and industrial units at its perimeter. Beyond the city stretched green fields, hills, and broad prairies. Surface vehicles crawled leisurely along the narrow streets and most of the citizens walked on foot. An incredible anachronism it seemed, dragged up from the past.

"I'm accustomed to the uniform Galactic culture," Rogers said. "Relay keeps the technocratic and ideological level constant throughout. It's hard to adjust to such a radically different social stage. But you've been cut off."

"Cut off?" asked Williamson.

"From Relay. You've had to develop without help."

In front of them a surface vehicle crept to a halt. The driver opened the doors manually.

“Now that I recall these factors, I can adjust,” Rogers assured him.

“On the contrary,” Williamson said, entering the vehicle. “We’ve been receiving your Relay coordinates for over a century.” He motioned Rogers to get in beside him.

Rogers was puzzled. “I don’t understand. You mean you hooked onto the web and yet made no attempt to —”

“We receive your coordinates,” Gene Williamson said, “but our citizens are not interested in using them.”

The surface vehicle hurried along the highway, past the rim of an immense red hill. Soon the city lay behind them — a faintly glowing place reflecting the rays of the sun. Bushes and plants appeared along the highway. The sheer side of the cliff rose, a towering wall of deep red sandstone; ragged, untouched.

“Nice evening,” Williamson said.

Rogers nodded in disturbed agreement.

Williamson rolled down the window. Cool air blew into the car. A few gnatlike insects followed. Far off, two tiny figures were plowing a field — a man and a huge lumbering beast.

“When will we be there?” Rogers asked.

“Soon. Most of us live away from the cities. We live in the country — in isolated self-sufficient farm units. They’re modeled on the manors of the Middle Ages.”

“Then you maintain only the most rudimentary subsistence level. How many people live on each farm?”

“Perhaps a hundred men and women.”

“A hundred people can’t manage anything more complex than weaving and dyeing and paper pressing.”

“We have special industrial units — manufacturing systems. This vehicle is a good example of what we can turn out. We have communication and sewage and medical agencies. We have technological advantages equal to Terra’s.”

“Terra of the twenty-first century,” Rogers protested. “But that was three hundred years ago. You’re purposely maintaining an archaic culture in the face of the Relay coordinates. It doesn’t make any sense.”

“Maybe we prefer it.”

“But you’re not free to prefer an inferior cultural stage. Every culture has to keep pace with the general trend. Relay makes actual a uniformity of development. It integrates the valid factors and rejects the rest.”

They were approaching the farm, Gene Williamson’s “manor.” It consisted of a few simple buildings clustered together in a valley, to the side of the highway, surrounded by fields and pastures. The surface vehicle turned down a narrow side road and spiraled cautiously toward the floor of the valley. The air became darker. Cold wind blew into the car, and the driver clicked his headlights on.

“No robots?” Rogers asked.

“No,” Williamson replied. “We do all our own work.”

“You’re making a purely arbitrary distinction,” Rogers pointed out. “A robot is a machine. You don’t dispense with machines as such. This car is a machine.”

“True,” Williamson acknowledged.

“The machine is a development of the tool,” Rogers went on. “The ax is a simple machine. A stick becomes a tool, a simple machine, in the hands of a man reaching for something. A machine is merely a multi-element tool that increases the power ratio. Man is the tool-making animal. The history of man is the history of tools into machines, greater and more efficient functioning elements. If you reject machinery you reject man’s essential key.”

“Here we are,” Williamson said. The vehicle came to a halt and the driver opened the doors for them.

Three or four wooden buildings loomed up in the darkness. A few dim shapes moved around — human shapes.

“Dinner’s ready,” Williamson said, sniffing. “I can smell it.”

They entered the main building. Several men and women were sitting at a long rough table. Plates and dishes had been set in front of them. They were waiting for Williamson.

“This is Edward Rogers,” Williamson announced. The people studied Rogers curiously, then turned back to their food.

“Sit down,” a dark-eyed girl urged. “By me.”

They made a place for him near the end of the table. Rogers started forward, but Williamson restrained him. “Not there. You’re *my* guest. You’re expected to sit with me.”

The girl and her companion laughed. Rogers sat down awkwardly by Williamson. The bench was rough and hard under him. He examined a handmade wooden drinking cup. The food was piled in huge wooden bowls. There was a stew and a salad and great loaves of bread.

“We could be back in the fourteenth century,” Rogers said.

“Yes,” Williamson agreed. “Manor life goes back to Roman times and to the classical world. The Gauls. Britons.”

“These people here. Are they —”

Williamson nodded. “My family. We’re divided up into small units arranged according to the traditional patriarch basis. I’m the oldest male and titular head.”

The people were eating rapidly, intent on their food — boiled meat, vegetables, scooped up with hunks of bread and butter and washed down with milk. The room was lit by fluorescent lighting.

“Incredible,” Rogers murmured. “You’re still using electric power.”

“Oh, yes. There are plenty of waterfalls on this planet. The vehicle was electric. It was run by a storage battery.”

“Why are there no older men?” Rogers saw several dried-up old women, but Williamson was the oldest man. And he couldn’t have been over thirty.

“The fighting,” Williamson replied, with an expressive gesture.

“Fighting?”

“Clan wars between families are a major part of our culture.” Williamson nodded toward the long table. “We don’t live long.”

Rogers was stunned. “Clan wars? But —”

“We have pennants, and emblems — like the old Scottish tribes.”

He touched a bright ribbon on his sleeve, the representation of a bird. “There are emblems and colors for each family and we fight over them. The Williamson family no longer controls this planet. There is no central agency, now. For a major issue we have the plebiscite — a vote by all the clans. Each family on the planet has a vote.”

“Like the American Indians.”

Williamson nodded. “It’s a tribal system. In time we’ll be distinct tribes, I suppose. We still retain a common language, but we’re breaking up — decentralizing. And each family to its own ways, its own customs and manners.”

“Just what do you fight for?”

Williamson shrugged. “Some real things like land and women. Some imaginary. Prestige for instance. When honor is at stake we have an official semi-annual public battle. A man from each family takes part. The best warrior and his weapons.”

“Like the medieval joust.”

“We’ve drawn from all traditions. Human tradition as a whole.”

“Does each family have its separate deity?”

Williamson laughed. “No. We worship in common a vague animism. A sense of the general positive vitality of the universal process.” He held up a loaf of bread. “Thanks for all this.”

“Which you grew yourselves.”

“On a planet provided for us.” Williamson ate his bread thoughtfully. “The old records say the ship was almost finished. Fuel just about gone — one dead, and waste after another. If this planet hadn’t turned up, the whole expedition would have perished.”

“Cigar?” Williamson said, when the empty bowls had been pushed back.

“Thanks.” Rogers accepted a cigar noncommittally. Williamson lit his own, and settled back against the wall.

“How long are you staying?” he asked presently.

“Not long,” Rogers answered.

“There’s a bed fixed up for you,” Williamson said. “We retire early, but there’ll be some kind of dancing, also singing and dramatic acts. We devote a lot of time to staging, and producing drama.”

“You place an emphasis on psychological release?”

“We enjoy making and doing things, if that’s what you mean.”

Rogers stared about him. The walls were covered with murals painted directly on the rough wood. “So I see,” he said. “You grind your own colors from clay and berries?”

“Not quite,” Williamson replied. “We have a big pigment industry. Tomorrow I’ll show you our kiln where we fire our own things. Some of our best work is with fabrics and screen processes.”

“Interesting. A decentralized society, moving gradually back into primitive tribalism. A society that voluntarily rejects the advanced technocratic and cultural products of the Galaxy, and thus deliberately withdraws from contact with the rest of mankind.”

“From the uniform Relay-controlled society only,” Williamson insisted.

“Do you know why Relay maintains a uniform level for all worlds?” Rogers asked. “I’ll tell you. There are two reasons. First, the body of knowledge which men have amassed doesn’t permit duplication of experiment. There’s no time.

“When a discovery has been made it’s absurd to repeat it on countless planets throughout the universe. Information gained on any of the thousand worlds is flashed to Relay Center and then out again to the whole Galaxy. Relay studies and selects experiences and coordinates them into a rational, functional system with contradictions. Relay orders the total experience of mankind into a coherent structure.”

“And the second reason?”

“If uniform culture is maintained, controlled from a central source, there won’t be war.”

“True,” Williamson admitted.

“We’ve abolished war. It’s as simple as that. We have a homogeneous culture like that of ancient Rome — a common culture for all mankind which we maintain throughout the Galaxy. Each planet is as involved in it as any other. There are no backwaters of culture to breed envy and hatred.”

“Such as this.”

Rogers let out his breath slowly. “Yes — you’ve confronted us with a strange situation. We’ve searched for Williamson’s World for three

centuries. We've wanted it, dreamed of finding it. It has seemed like Prester John's Empire — a fabulous world, cut off from the rest of humanity. Maybe not real at all. Frank Williamson might have crashed."

"But he didn't."

"He didn't, and Williamson's World is alive with a culture of its own. Deliberately set apart, with its own way of life, its own standards. Now contact has been made, and our dream has come true. The people of the Galaxy will soon be informed that Williamson's World has been found. We can now restore the first colony outside the Solar System to its rightful place in the Galactic culture."

Rogers reached into his coat, and brought out a metal packet. He unfastened the packet and laid a clean, crisp document on the table.

"What's this?" Williamson asked.

"The Articles of Incorporation. For you to sign, so that Williamson's World can become a part of the Galactic culture."

Williamson and the rest of the people in the room fell silent. They gazed down at the document, none of them speaking.

"Well?" Rogers said. He was tense. He pushed the document toward Williamson. "Here it is."

Williamson shook his head. "Sorry." He pushed the document firmly back toward Rogers. "We've already taken a plebiscite. I hate to disappoint you, but we've already decided not to join. That's our *final* decision."

The Class-One battleship assumed an orbit outside the gravity belt of Williamson's World.

Commander Ferris contacted the Relay Center. “We’re here. What next?”

“Send down a wiring team. Report back to me as soon as it has made surface contact.”

Ten minutes later Corporal Pete Matson was dropped overboard in a pressurized gravity suit. He drifted slowly toward the blue and green globe beneath, turning and twisting as he neared the surface of the planet.

Matson landed and bounced a couple of times. He got shakily to his feet. He seemed to be at the edge of a forest. In the shadow of the huge trees he removed his crash helmet. Holding his blast rifle tightly he made his way forward, cautiously advancing among the trees.

His earphones clicked. “Any sign of activity?”

“None, Commander,” he signaled back.

“There’s what appears to be a village to your right. You may run into someone. Keep moving, and watch out. The rest of the team is dropping, now. Instructions will follow from your Relay web.”

“I’ll watch out,” Matson promised, cradling his blast rifle. He sighted it experimentally at a distant hill and squeezed the trigger. The hill disintegrated into dust, a rising column of waste particles.

Matson climbed a long ridge and shielded his eyes to peer around him.

He could see the village. It was small, like a country town on Terra. It looked interesting. For a moment he hesitated. Then he stepped quickly down from the ridge and headed toward the village, moving rapidly, his supple body alert.

Above him, from the Class-One battleship, three more of the team were already falling, clutching their guns and tumbling gently toward the surace of the planet…

Rogers folded up the Incorporation papers and returned them slowly to his coat. “You understand what you’re doing?” he asked.

The room was deathly silent. Williamson nodded. “Of course. We’re refusing to join your Relay system.”

Rogers’ fingers touched the trace web. The web warmed into life. “I’m sorry to hear that,” he said.

“Does it surprise you?”

“Not exactly. Relay submitted our scout’s report to the computers. There was always the possibility you’d refuse. I was given instructions in case of such an event.”

“What are your instructions?”

Rogers examined his wristwatch. “To inform you that you have six hours to join us — or be blasted out of the universe.” He got abruptly to his feet. “I’m sorry this had to happen. Williamson’s World is one of our most precious legends. But nothing must destroy the unity of the Galaxy.”

Williamson had risen. His face was ash white, the color of death. They faced each other defiantly.

“We’ll fight,” Williamson said quietly. His fingers knotted together violently, clenching and unclenching.

“That’s unimportant. You’ve received Relay coordinates on weapons development. You know what our war fleet has.”

The other people sat quietly at their places, staring rigidly down at their empty plates. No one moved.

“Is it necessary?” Williamson said harshly.

“Cultural variation must be avoided if the Galaxy is to have peace,” Rogers replied firmly.

“You’d destroy us to avoid war?”

“We’d destroy anything to avoid war. We can’t permit our society to degenerate into bickering provinces, forever quarreling and fighting — like your clans. We’re stable because we lack the very concept of variation. Uniformity must be preserved and separation must be discouraged. The idea itself must remain unknown.”

Williamson was thoughtful. “Do you think you can keep the idea unknown? There are so many semantic correlatives, hints, verbal leads. Even if you blast us, it may arise somewhere else.”

“We’ll take that chance.” Rogers moved toward the door. “I’ll return to my ship and wait there. I suggest you take another vote. Maybe knowing how far we’re prepared to go will change the results.”

“I doubt it.”

Rogers’ web whispered suddenly. “This is North at Relay.”

Rogers fingered the web in acknowledgment.

“A Class-One Battleship is in your area. A team has already been landed. Keep your ship grounded until it can fall back. I’ve ordered the team to lay out its fission-mine terminals.”

Rogers said nothing. His fingers tightened around the web convulsively.

“What’s wrong?” Williamson asked.

“Nothing.” Rogers pushed the door open. “I’m in a hurry to return to my ship. Let’s go.”

Commander Ferris contacted Rogers as soon as his ship had left Williamson’s World.

“North tells me you’ve already informed them,” Ferris said.

“That’s right. He also contacted your team directly. Had it prepare to attack.”

“So I’m informed. How much time did you offer them?”

“Six hours.”

“Do you think they’ll give in?”

“I don’t know,” Rogers said. “I hope so. But I doubt it.”

Williamson’s World turned slowly in the viewscreen with its green and blue forest, rivers and oceans. Terra might have looked that way, once. He could see the Class-One battleship, a great silvery globe moving slowly in its orbit around the planet.

The legendary world had been found and contacted. Now it would be destroyed. He had tried to prevent it, but without success. He couldn’t prevent the inevitable.

If Williamson’s World refused to join the Galactic culture its destruction became a necessity — grim, axiomatic. It was either Williamson’s World or

the Galaxy. To preserve the greater, the lesser had to be sacrificed.

He made himself as comfortable as possible by the viewscreen, and waited.

At the end of six hours a line of black dots rose from the planet and headed slowly toward the Class-One battleship. He recognized them for what they were — old-fashioned jet-driven rocket ships. A formation of antiquated war vessels, rising up to give battle.

The planet had not changed its mind. It was going to fight. It was willing to be destroyed, rather than give up its way of life. The black dots grew swiftly larger, became roaring blazing metal disks puffing awkwardly along. A pathetic sight. Rogers felt strangely moved, watching the jet-driven ships divide up for the contact. The Class-One battleship had secured its orbit, and was swinging in a lazy, efficient arc. Its banks of energy tubes were slowly rising, lining up to meet the attack.

Suddenly the formation of the ancient rocketships dived. They rumbled over the Class-One, firing jerkily. The Class-One's tubes followed their path. They began to reform clumsily, gaining distance for a second try, and another run.

A tongue of colorless energy flicked out. The attackers vanished.

Commander Ferris contacted Rogers. "The poor tragic fools." His heavy face was gray. "Attacking us with those things."

"Any damage?"

"None whatever." Ferris wiped his forehead shakily. "No damage to me at all."

"What next?" Rogers asked stonily.

“I’ve declined the mine operation and passed it back to Relay. They’ll have to do it. The impulse should already be —” Below them, the green and blue globe shuddered convulsively. Soundlessly, effortlessly, it flew apart. Fragments rose, bits of debris and the planet dissolved in a cloud of white flame, a blazing mass of incandescent fire. For an instant it remained a miniature sun, lighting up the void. Then it faded into ash.

The screens of Rogers’ ship hummed into life, as the debris struck. Particles rained against them, and were instantly disintegrated.

“Well,” Ferris said. “It’s over. North will report the original scout mistaken. Williamson’s World wasn’t found. The legend will remain a legend.”

Rogers continued to watch until the last bits of debris had ceased flying, and only a vague, discolored shadow remained. The screens clicked off automatically. To his right, the Class-One battleship picked up speed and headed toward the Riga System.

Williamson’s World was gone. The Galactic Relay culture had been preserved. The idea, the concept of a separate culture with its own ways, its own customs, had been disposed of in the most effective possible way.

“Good job,” the Relay trace web whispered. North was pleased. “The fission mines were perfectly placed. Nothing remains.”

“No,” Rogers agreed. “Nothing remains.”

Corporal Pete Matson pushed the front door open, grinning from ear to ear. “Hi, honey! Surprise!”

“Pete!” Gloria Matson came running, throwing her arms around her husband. “What are you doing home? Pete —”

“Special leave. Forty-eight hours.” Pete tossed down his suitcase triumphantly. “Hi there, kid.”

His son greeted him shyly. “Hello.”

Pete squatted down and opened his suitcase. “How have things been going? How’s school?”

“He’s had another cold,” Gloria said. “He’s almost over it. But what happened? Why did they —”

“Military secret.” Pete fumbled in his suitcase. “Here.” He held something out to his son. “I brought you something. A souvenir.”

He handed his son a handmade wooden drinking cup. The boy took it shyly and turned it around, curious and puzzled. “What’s a — a *souvenir?”*

Matson struggled to express the difficult concept. “Well, it’s something that reminds you of a different place. Something you don’t have, where you are. You know.” Matson tapped the cup. “That’s to drink out of. It’s sure not like our plastic cups, is it?”

“No,” the child said.

“Look at this, Gloria.” Pete shook out a great folded cloth from his suitcase, printed with multicolored designs. “Picked this up cheap. You can make a shirt out of it. What do you say? Ever seen anything like it?”

“No,” Gloria said, awed. “I haven’t.” She took the cloth and fingered it reverently.

Pete Matson beamed, as his wife and child stood clutching the souvenirs he had brought them, reminders of his excursion to distant places. Foreign lands.

“Gee,” his son whispered, turning the cup around and around. A strange light glowed in his eyes. Thanks a lot, Dad. For the -- *souvenir.”*

The strange light grew.

Survey Team

Halloway came up through six miles of ash to see how the rocket looked in landing. He emerged from the lead-shielded bore and joined Young, crouching down with a small knot of surface troops.

The surface of the planet was dark and silent. The air stung his nose. It smelled foul. Halloway shivered uneasily. “Where the hell are we?”

A soldier pointed into the blackness. “The mountains are over there. See them? The Rockies, and this is Colorado.”

Colorado… The old name awakened vague emotion in Halloway. He fingered his blast rifle. “When will it get here?” he asked. Far off, against the horizon, he could see the Enemy’s green and yellow signal flares. And an occasional flash of fission white.

“Any time now. It’s mechanically controlled all the way, piloted by robot. When it comes it really comes.”

An Enemy mine burst a few dozen miles away. For a brief instant the landscape was outlined in jagged lightning. Halloway and the troops dropped to the ground automatically. He caught the dead burned smell of the surface of Earth as it was now, thirty years after the war began.

It was a lot different from the way he remembered it when he was a kid in California. He could remember the valley country, grape orchards and walnuts and lemons. Smudge pots under the orange trees. Green mountains and sky the color of a woman’s eyes. And the fresh smell of the soil …

That was all gone now. Nothing remained but gray ash pulverized with the white stones of buildings. Once a city had been in this spot. He could see the yawning cavities of cellars, filled now with slag, dried rivers of rust that had once been buildings. Rubble strewn everywhere, aimlessly …

The mine flare faded out and the blackness settled back. They got cautiously to their feet. “Quite a sight,” a soldier murmured.

“It was a lot different before,” Halloway said.

“Was it? I was born undersurface.”

“In those days we grew our food right in the ground, on the surface. In the soil. Not in underground tanks. We —”

Halloway broke off. A great rushing sound filled the air suddenly, cutting off his words. An immense shape roared past them in the blackness, struck someplace close, and shook the earth.

“The rocket!” a soldier shouted. They all began running, Halloway lumbering awkwardly along.

“Good news, I hope,” Young said, close by him.

“I hope, too,” Halloway gasped. “Mars is our last chance. If this doesn’t work we’re finished. The report on Venus was negative; nothing there but lava and steam.”

Later they examined the rocket from Mars.

“It’ll do,” Young murmured.

“You’re sure?” Director Davidson asked tensely. “Once we get there we can’t come running back.”

“We’re sure.” Halloway tossed the spools across the desk to Davidson. “Examine them yourself. The air on Mars will be thin, and dry. The gravity

is much weaker than ours. But we'll be able to live there, which is more than you can say for this God-forsaken Earth."

Davidson picked up the spools. The unblinking recessed lights gleamed down on the metal desk, the metal walls and floor of the office. Hidden machinery wheezed in the walls, maintaining the air and temperature. "I'll have to rely on you experts, of course. If some vital factor is not taken into account —"

"Naturally, it's a gamble," Young said. "We can't be sure of all factors at this distance." He tapped the spools. "Mechanical samples and photos. Robots creeping around, doing the best they can. We're lucky to have *anything* to go on."

"There's no radiation at least," Halloway said. "We can count on that. But Mars will be dry and dusty and cold. It's a long way out."Weak sun. Deserts and wrinkled hills."

"Mars is old," Young agreed.

"It was cooled a long time ago. Look at it this way: We have eight planets, excluding Earth. Pluto to Jupiter is *out.* No chance of survival there. Mercury is nothing but liquid metal. Venus is still volcano and steam — pre-Cambrian. That's seven of the eight. Mars is the only possibility *a priori."*

"In other words," Davidson said slowly, "Mars *has* to be okay because there's nothing else for us to try."

"We could stay here. Live on here in the undersurface systems like gophers."

"We could not last more than another year. You've seen the recent psych graphs."

They had. The tension index was up. Men weren't made to live in metal tunnels, living on tank-grown food, working and sleeping and dying without seeing the sun.

It was the children they were really thinking about. Kids that had never been up to the surface. Wan-faced pseudo mutants with eyes like blind fish. A generation born in the subterranean world. The tension index was up because men were seeing their children alter and meld in with a world of tunnels and slimy darkness and dripping luminous rocks.

"Then it's agreed?" Young said.

Davidson searched the faces of the two technicians. "Maybe we could reclaim the surface, revive Earth again, renew its soil. It hasn't really gone that far, has it?"

"No chance," Young said flatly. "Even if we could work an arrangement with the Enemy there'll be particles in suspension for another fifty years. Earth will be too hot for life the rest of this century. *And we can't wait."*

"All right," Davidson said. "I'll authorize the survey team. We'll risk that, at least. You want to go? Be the first humans to land on Mars?"

"You bet," Halloway said grimly. "It's in our contract that I go."

The red globe that was Mars grew steadily larger. In the control room Young and van Ecker, the navigator, watched it intently.

"We'll have to bail," van Ecker said. "No chance of landing at this velocity."

Young was nervous. "That's all right for us, but how about the first load of settlers? We can't expect women and children to jump."

“By then we’ll know more.” Van Ecker nodded and Captain Mason sounded the emergency alarm. Throughout the ship relay bells clanged ominously. The ship throbbed with scampering feet as crew members grabbed their jump-suits and hurried to the hatches.

“Mars,” Captain Mason murmured, still at the viewscreen. “Not like Luna. This is the real thing.”

Young and Halloway moved toward the hatch. “We better get going.”

Mars was swelling rapidly. An ugly bleak globe, dull red. Halloway fitted on his jump helmet. Van Ecker came behind him.

Mason remained in the control cabin. “I’ll follow,” he said, “after the crew’s out.”

The hatch slid back and they moved out onto the jump shelf. The crew were already beginning to leap.

“Too bad to waste a ship,” Young said.

“Can’t be helped.” Van Ecker clamped his helmet on and jumped. His brake-units sent him spinning upward, rising like a balloon into the blackness above them. Young and Halloway followed. Below them the ship plunged on, downward toward the surface of Mars. In the sky tiny luminous dots drifted — the crew members.

“I’ve been thinking,” Halloway said into his helmet speaker.

“What about?” Young’s voice came in his earphones.

“Davidson was talking about overlooking some vital factor. There is one we haven’t considered.”

“What’s that?”

“The Martians.”

“Good God!” van Ecker chimed in. Halloway could see him drifting off to his right, settling slowly toward the planet below. “You think there *are* Martians?”

“It’s possible. Mars will sustain life. If we can live there other complex forms could exist, too.”

“We’ll know soon enough,” Young said.

Van Ecker laughed. “Maybe they trapped one of our robot rockets. Maybe they’re expecting us.”

Halloway was silent. It was too close to be funny. The red planet was growing rapidly. He could see white spots at the poles. A few hazy blue-green ribbons that had once been called *canals.* Was there a civilization down there, an organized culture waiting for them, as they drifted slowly down? He groped at his pack until his fingers closed over the butt of his pistol.

“Better get your guns out,” he said.

“If there’s a Martian defense system waiting for us we won’t have a chance,” Young said. “Mars cooled millions of years ahead of Earth. It’s a cinch they’ll be so advanced we won’t even be —”

“Too late now,” Mason’s voice came faintly. “You experts should have thought of that before.”

“Where are you?” Halloway demanded.

“Drifting below you. The ship is empty. Should strike any moment. I got all the equipment out, attached it to automatic jump units.”

A faint flash of light exploded briefly below, winked out. The ship, striking the surface…

“I’m almost down,” Mason said nervously. “I’ll be the first…”

Mars had ceased to be a globe. Now it was a great red dish, a vast plain of dull rust spread out beneath them. They fell slowly, silently, toward it. Mountains became visible. Narrow trickles of water that were rivers. A vague checker-board pattern that might have been fields and pastures…

Halloway gripped his pistol tightly. His brake-units shrieked as the air thickened. He was almost down. A muffled *crunch* sounded abruptly in his earphones.

“Mason!” Young shouted.

“I’m down,” Mason’s voice came faintly.

“You all right?”

“Knocked the wind out of me. But I’m all right.”

“How does it look?” Halloway demanded.

For a moment there was silence. Then: “Good God!” Mason gasped. “A *city!”*

“A city?” Young yelled. “What kind? What’s it like?”

“Can you see them?” van Ecker shouted. “What are they like? Are there a lot of them?”

They could hear Mason breathing. His breath rasped hoarsely in their phones. “No,” he gasped at last. “No sign of life. No activity. The city is — it looks deserted.”

“Deserted?”

“Ruins. Nothing but ruins. Miles of wrecked columns and walls and rusting scaffolding.”

“Thank God,” Young breathed. “They must have died out. We’re safe. They must have evolved and finished their cycle a long time ago.”

“Did they leave us anything?” Fear clutched at Halloway. “Is there anything left for *us?”* He clawed wildly at his brake-units, struggling frantically to hurry his descent. “Is it all gone?”

“You think they used up everything?” Young said. “You think they exhausted all the —”

“I can’t tell.” Mason’s weak voice came, tinged with uneasiness. “It looks bad. Big pits. Mining pits. I can’t tell, but it looks bad…”

Halloway struggled desperately with his brake-units.

The planet was a shambles.

“Good God,” Young mumbled. He sat down on a broken column and wiped his face. “Not a damn thing left. Nothing.”

Around them the crew were setting up emergency defense units. The communications team was assembling a battery-driven transmitter. A bore team was drilling for water. Other teams were scouting around, looking for food.

“There won’t be any signs of life,” Halloway said. He waved at the endless expanse of debris and rust. “They’re gone, finished a long time ago.”

“I don’t understand,” Mason muttered. “How could they wreck a whole planet?”

“We wrecked Earth in thirty years.”

“Not this way. They’ve *used* Mars up. Used up everything. Nothing left. Nothing at all. It’s one vast scrap-heap.”

Shakily Halloway tried to light a cigarette. The match burned feebly, then sputtered out. He felt light and dopey. His heart throbbed heavily. The distant sun beat down, pale and small. Mars was a cold, lonely dead world.

Halloway said, “They must have had a hell of a time, watching their cities rot away. No water or minerals, finally no soil.” He picked up a handful of dry sand, let it trickle through his fingers.

“Transmitter working,” a crew member said.

Mason got to his feet and lumbered awkwardly over to the transmitter. “I’ll tell Davidson what we’ve found.” He bent over the microphone.

Young looked across at Halloway. “Well, I guess we’re stuck. How long will our supplies carry us?”

“Couple of months.”

“And then —” Young snapped his fingers. “Like the Martians.” He squinted at the long corroded wall of a ruined house. “I wonder what they were like.”

“A semantics team is probing the ruins. Maybe they’ll turn up something.”

Beyond the ruined city stretched out what had once been an industrial area. Fields of twisted installations, towers and pipes and machinery. Sand-covered and partly rusted. The surface of the land was pocked with great gaping sores. Yawning pits where scoops had once dredged. Entrances of underground mines. Mars was honeycombed. Termite-ridden. A whole race had burrowed and dug in trying to stay alive. The Martians had sucked Mars dry, then fled it.

“A graveyard,” Young said. “Well, they got what they deserved.”

“You blame them? What should they have done? Perished a few thousand years sooner and left their planet in better shape?”

“They could have left us *something,”* Young said stubbornly. “Maybe we can dig up their bones and boil them. I’d like to get my hands on one of them long enough to —”

A pair of crewmen came hurrying across the sand. “Look at these!” They carried armloads of metal tubes, glittering cylinders heaped up in piles. “Look what we found buried!”

Halloway roused himself. “What is it?”

“Records. Written documents. Get these to the semantics team!” Carmichael spilled his armload at Halloway’s feet. “And this isn’t all. We found something else — installations.”

“Installations? What kind?”

“Rocket launchers. Old towers, rusty as hell. There are fields of them on the other side of the town.” Carmichael wiped perspiration from his red

face. “They didn’t die, Halloway. They took off. They used up this place, then left.”

Doctor Judde and Young pored over the gleaming tubes. “It’s coming,” Judde murmured, absorbed in the shifting pattern undulating across the scanner.

“Can you make anything out?” Halloway asked tensely.

“They left, all right. Took off. The whole lot of them.”

Young turned to Halloway. “What do you think of that? So they didn’t die out.”

“Can’t you tell where they went?”

Judde shook his head. “Some planet their scout ships located. Ideal climate and temperature.” He pushed the scanner aside. “In their last period the whole Martian civilization was oriented around this escape planet. Big project, moving a society lock, stock and barrel. It took them three or four hundred years to get everything of value off Mars and on its way to the other planet.”

“How did the operation come out?”

“Not so good. The planet was beautiful. But they had to adapt. Apparently they didn’t anticipate all the problems arising from colonization on a strange planet.” Judde indicated a cylinder. “The colonies deteriorated rapidly. Couldn’t keep the traditions and techniques going. The society broke apart. Then came war, barbarism.”

“Then their migration was a failure.” Halloway pondered. “Maybe it can’t be done. Maybe it’s impossible.”

“Not a failure,” Judde corrected. “They lived, at least. This place was no good any more. Better to live as savages on a strange world than stay here and die. So they say, on these cylinders.”

“Come along,” Young said to Halloway. The two men stepped outside the semantics hut. It was night. The sky was littered with glowing stars. The two moons had risen. They glimmered coldly, two dead eyes in the chilly sky.

“This place won’t do,” Young stated. “We can’t migrate here. That’s settled.”

Halloway eyed him. “What’s on your mind?”

“This was the last of the nine planets. We tested every one of them.” Young’s face was alive with emotion. “None of them will support life. All of them are lethal or useless, like this rubbish heap. The whole damn solar system is out.”

“So?”

“We’ll have to leave the solar system.”

“And go where? *How?*”

Young pointed toward the Martian ruins, to the city and the rusted, bent rows of towers. “Where *they* went. They found a place to go. An untouched world outside the solar system. And they developed some kind of outer-space drive to get them there.”

“You mean —”

“Follow them. This solar system is dead. But outside, someplace in some other system, they found an escape world. And they were able to get there.”

“We’d have to fight with them if we land on their planet. They won’t want to share it.”

Young spat angrily on the sand. “Their colonies deteriorated. Remember? Broke down into barbarism. We can handle them. We’ve got everything in the way of war weapons — weapons that can wipe a planet clean.”

“We don’t want to do that.”

“What *do* we want to do? Tell Davidson we’re stuck on Terra? Let the human race turn into underground moles? Blind crawling things…”

“If we follow the Martians we’ll be competing for their world. They found it; the damn thing belongs to them, not us. And maybe we can’t work out their drive. Maybe the schematics are lost.”

Judde emerged from the semantics hut. “I’ve some more information. The whole story is here. Details on the escape planet. Fauna and flora. Studies of its gravity, air density, mineral possessions, soil layer, climate, temperature — everything.”

“How about their drive?”

“Breakdown on that, too. Everything.” Judde was shaking with excitement. “I have an idea. Let’s get the designs team on these drive schematics and see if they can duplicate it. If they can, we could follow the Martians. We could sort of *share* their planet with them.”

“See?” Young said to Halloway. “Davidson will say the same thing. It’s obvious.”

Halloway turned and walked off.

“What’s wrong with him?” Judde asked.

“Nothing. He’ll get over it.” Young scratched out a quick message on a piece of paper. “Have this transmitted to Davidson back on Terra.”

Judde peered at the message. He whistled. “You’re telling him about the Martian migration. And about the escape planet?”

“We want to get started. It’ll take a long time to get things under way.”

“Will Halloway come around?”

“He’ll come around,” Young said. “Don’t worry about him.”

Halloway gazed up at the towers. The leaning, sagging towers from which the Martian transports had been launched thousands of years before.

Nothing stirred. No sign of life. The whole dried-up planet was dead.

Halloway wandered among the towers. The beam from his helmet cut a white path in front of him. Ruins, heaps of rusting metal. Bales of wire and building material. Parts of uncompleted equipment. Half-buried construction sections sticking up from the sand.

He came to a raised platform and mounted the ladder cautiously. He found himself in an observation mount, surrounded by the remains of dials and meters. A telescopic sight stuck up, rusted in place, frozen tight.

“Hey,” a voice came from below. “Who’s up there?”

“Halloway.”

“God, you scared me.” Carmichael slid his blast rifle away and climbed the ladder. “What are you doing?”

“Looking around.”

Carmichael appeared beside him, puffing and red-faced. “Interesting, these towers. This was an automatic sighting station. Fixed the takeoff for supply transports. The population was already gone.” Carmichael slapped at the ruined control board. “These supply ships continued to take off, loaded by machines and dispatched by machines, after all the Martians were gone.”

“Lucky for them they had a place to go.”

“Sure was. The minerals team says there’s not a damn thing left here. Nothing but dead sand and rock and debris. Even the water’s no good. They took everything of value.”

“Judde says their escape world is pretty nice.”

“Virgin.” Carmichael smacked his fat lips. “Never touched. Trees and meadows and blue oceans. He showed me a scanner translation of a cylinder.”

“Too bad we don’t have a place like that to go. A virgin world for ourselves.”

Carmichael was bent over the telescope. “This here sighted for them. When the escape planet swam into view a relay delivered a trigger charge to the control tower. The tower launched the ships. When the ships were gone a new flock came up into position.” Carmichael began to polish the encrusted lenses of the telescope, wiping the accumulated rust and debris away. “Maybe we’ll see their planet.”

In the ancient lenses a vague luminous globe was swimming. Halloway could make it out, obscured by the filth of centuries, hidden behind a curtain of metallic particles and dirt.

Carmichael was down on his hands and knees, working with the focus mechanism. “See anything?” he demanded.

Halloway nodded. “Yeah.”

Carmichael pushed him away. “Let me look.” He squinted into the lens. “Aw, for God’s sake!”

“What’s wrong? Can’t you see it?”

“I see it,” Carmichael said, getting down on his hands and knees again. “The thing must have slipped. Or the time shift is too great. But this is supposed to adjust automatically. Of course, the gear box has been frozen for —”

“What’s wrong?” Halloway demanded.

“That’s Earth. Don’t you recognize it?”

“Earth!”

Carmichael sneered with disgust. “This fool thing must be busted. I wanted to get a look at their dream planet. That’s just old Terra, where we came from. All my work trying to fix this wreck up, and what do we see?”

“Earth!” Halloway murmured.

He had just finished telling Young about the telescope.

“I can’t believe it,” Young said. “But the description fitted Earth thousands of years ago…”

“How long ago did they take off?” Halloway asked.

“About six hundred thousand years ago,” Judde said.

“And their colonies descended into barbarism on the new planet.”

The four men were silent. They looked at each other, tight-lipped.

“We’ve destroyed two worlds,” Halloway said at last. “Not one. Mars first. We finished up here, then we moved to Terra. And we destroyed Terra as systematically as we did Mars.”

“A closed circle,” Mason said. “We’re back where we started. Back to reap the crop our ancestors sowed. They left Mars this way. Useless. And now we’re back here poking around the ruins like ghouls.”

“Shut up,” Young snapped. He paced angrily back and forth. “I can’t believe it.”

“We’re Martians. Descendants of the original stock that left here. We’re back from the colonies. Back home.” Mason’s voice rose hysterically. “We’re home again, where we belong!”

Judde pushed aside the scanner and got to his feet. “No doubt about it. I checked their analysis with our own archeological records. It fits. Their escape world was Terra, six hundred thousand years ago.”

“What’ll we tell Davidson?” Mason demanded. He giggled wildly. “We’ve found a perfect place. A word untouched by human hands. Still in the original cellophane wrapper.”

Halloway moved to the door of the hut, stood gazing silently out. Judde joined him. “This is catastrophic. We’re really stuck. What the hell are you looking at?”

Above them, the cold sky glittered. In the bleak light the barren plains of Mars stretched out, mile after mile of empty, wasted ruin.

“At that,” Halloway said. “You know what it reminds me of?”

“A picnic site.”

“Broken bottles and tin cans and wadded up plates. After the picnickers have left. Only, the picnickers are back. They’re back — and they have to live in the mess they made.”

“What’ll we tell Davidson?” Mason demanded.

“I’ve already called him,” Young said wearily. “I told him there was a planet, out of the solar system. Someplace we could go. The Martians had a drive.”

“A drive.” Judde pondered. “Those towers.” His lips twisted. “Maybe they did have an outer space drive. Maybe it’s worth going on with the translation.”

They looked at each other.

“Tell Davidson we’re going on,” Halloway ordered. “We’ll keep on until we find it. We’re not staying on this God-forsaken junkyard.” His gray eyes glowed. “We’ll find it, yet. A virgin world. A world that’s unspoiled.”

“*Unspoiled,*” Young echoed. “Nobody there ahead of us.”

“We’ll be the first,” Judde muttered avidly.

“It’s wrong!” Mason shouted. “Two are enough! Let’s not destroy a third world!”

Nobody listened to him. Judde and Young and Halloway gazed up, faces eager, hands clenching and unclenching. As if they were already there. As if they were already holding onto the new world, clutching it with all their strength. Tearing it apart, atom by atom…

Prominent Author

“My husband,” said Mary Ellis, “although he is a very prompt man, and hasn’t been late to work in twenty-five years, is actually still some place around the house.” She sipped at her faintly scented hormone and carbohydrate drink. “As a matter of fact, he won’t be leaving for another ten minutes.”

“Incredible,” said Dorothy Lawrence, who had finished *her* drink, and now basked in the dermalmist spray that descended over her virtually unclad body from an automatic jet above the couch. “What they won’t think of next!”

Mrs Ellis beamed proudly, as if she personally were an employee of Terran Development. “Yes, it is incredible. According to somebody down at the office, the whole history of civilization can be explained in terms of transportation techniques. Of course, I don’t know anything about history. That’s for Government research people. But from what this man told Henry —”

“Where’s my briefcase?” came a fussy voice from the bedroom. “Good Lord, Mary. I know I left it on the clothes-cleaner last night.”

“You left it upstairs,” Mary replied, raising her voice slightly. “Look in the closet.”

“Why would it be in the closet?” Sounds of angry stirring around. “You’d think a man’s own briefcase would be safe.” Henry Ellis stuck his head into the livingroom briefly. “I found it. Hello, Mrs Lawrence.”

“Good morning,” Dorothy Lawrence replied. “Mary was explaining that you’re still here.”

“Yes, I’m still here.” Ellis straightened his tie, as the mirror revolved slowly around him. “Anything you want me to pick up downtown, honey?”

“No,” Mary replied. “Nothing I can think of. I’ll vid you at the office if I remember something.”

“Is it true,” Mrs Lawrence asked, “that *as soon as you step into it* you’re all the way downtown?”

“Well, almost all the way.”

“A hundred and sixty miles! It’s beyond belief. Why, it takes my husband two and a half hours to get his monojet through the commercial lanes and down at the parking lot then walk all the way up to his office.”

“I know,” Ellis muttered, grabbing his hat and coat. “Used to take me about that long. But no more.” He kissed his wife goodbye. “So long. See you tonight. Nice to have seen you again, Mrs Lawrence.”

“Can I — watch?” Mrs Lawrence asked hopefully.

“Watch? Of course, of course.” Ellis hurried through the house, out the back door and down the steps into the yard. “Come along!” he shouted impatiently. “I don’t want to be late. It’s nine-fifty-nine and I have to be at my desk by ten.”

Mrs Lawrence hurried eagerly after Ellis. In the backyard stood a big circular hoop that gleamed brightly in the mid-morning sun. Ellis turned some controls at the base. The hoop changed color, from silver to a shimmering red.

“Here I go!” Ellis shouted. He stepped briskly into the hoop. The hoop fluttered about him. There was a faint *pop*. The glow died.

“Good Heavens!” Mrs Lawrence gasped. “He’s gone!”

“He’s in downtown N’York,” Mary Ellis corrected. “I wish *my* husband had a Jiffi-scuttler. When they show up on the market commercially maybe I can afford to get him one.”

“Oh, they’re very handy,” Mary Ellis agreed. “He’s probably saying hello to the boys right this minute.”

Henry Ellis was in a sort of tunnel. All round him a gray, formless tube stretched out in both directions, a sort of hazy sewer-pipe.

Framed in the opening behind him, he could see the faint outline of his own house. His back porch and yard, Mary standing on the steps in her red bra and slacks. Mrs Lawrence beside her in green-checkered shorts. The cedar tree and rows of petunias. A hill. The neat little houses of Cedar Groves, Pennsylvania. And in front of him —

New York City. A wavering glimpse of the busy street-corner in front of his office. The great building itself, a section of concrete and glass and steel. People moving. Skyscrapers. Monojets landing in swarms. Aerial signs. Endless white-collar workers hurrying everywhere, rushing to their offices.

Ellis moved leisurely toward the New York end. He had taken the Jiffi-scuttler often enough to know just exactly how many steps it was. Five steps. Five steps along the wavery gray tunnel and he had gone a hundred and sixty miles. He halted, glancing back. So far he had gone three steps. Ninety-six miles. More than half way.

The fourth dimension was a wonderful thing. Ellis lit his pipe, leaning his briefcase against his trouser-leg and groping in his coat pocket for his tobacco. He still had thirty seconds to get to work. Plenty of time. The pipe-lighter flared and he sucked in expertly. He snapped the lighter shut and restored it to his pocket.

A wonderful thing, all right. The Jiffi-scuttler had already revolutionized society. It was now possible to go anywhere in the world *instantly,* with no time lapse. And without wading through endless lanes of other monojets, also going places. The transportation problem had been a major headache since the middle of the twentieth century. Every year more families moved from the cities out into the country, adding numbers to the already swollen swarms that choked the roads and jetlanes. But it was all solved now. An *infinite* number of Jiffi-scuttlers could be set up; there was no interference between them. The Jiffi-scuttler bridged distances non-spacially, through another dimension of some kind (they hadn't explained that part too clearly to him). For a flat thousand credits any Terran family could have Jiffi-scuttler hoops set up, one in the back yard — the other in Berlin, or Bermuda, or San Francisco, or Port Said. Anywhere in the world. Of course, there was one drawback. The hoop had to be anchored in one specific spot. You picked your destination and that was that. But for an office worker, it was perfect. Step in one end, step out the other. Five steps — a hundred and sixty miles. A hundred and sixty miles that had been a two-hour nightmare of grinding gears and sudden jolts, monojets cutting in and out, speeders, reckless flyers, alert cops waiting to pounce, ulcers and bad tempers. It was all over now. All over for him, at least, as an employee of Terran Development, the manufacturer of the Jiffi-scuttler. And soon for everybody, when they were commercially on the market.

Ellis sighed. Time for work. He could see Ed Hall racing up the steps of the TD building two at a time. Tony Franklin hurrying after him. Time to get moving. He bent down and reached for his briefcase —

It was then he saw them.

The wavery gray haze was thin there. A sort of thin spot where the shimmer wasn't so strong. Just a bit beyond his foot and past the corner of his briefcase.

Beyond the thin spot were three tiny figures. Just beyond the gray waver. Incredibly small men, no larger than insects. Watching him with incredulous astonishment.

Ellis gazed down intently, his briefcase forgotten. The three tiny men were equally dumbfounded. None of them stirred, the three tiny figures, rigid with awe. Henry Ellis bent over, his mouth open, eyes wide.

A fourth little figure joined the others. They all stood rooted to the spot, eyes bulging. They had on some kind of robes. Brown robes and sandals. Strange, unTerran costumes. Everything about them was unTerran. Their size, their oddly colored dark faces, their clothing — and their voices.

Suddenly the tiny figures were shouting shrilly at each other, squeaking a strange gibberish. They had broken out of their freeze and now ran about in queer, frantic circles. They raced with incredible speed, scampering like ants on a hot griddle. They raced jerkily, their arms and legs pumping wildly. And all the time they squeaked in their shrill high-pitched voices.

Ellis found his briefcase. He picked it up slowly. The figures watched in mixed wonder and terror as the huge bag rose, only a short distance from them. An idea drifted through Ellis's brain. Good Lord — could they come into the Jiffi-scuttler, through the gray haze?

But he had no time to find out. He was already late as it was. He pulled away and hurried towards the New York end of the tunnel. A second later he stepped out in the blinding sunlight, abruptly finding himself on the busy street-corner in front of his office.

"Hey, there, Hank!" Donald Potter shouted, as he raced through the doors into the TD building. "Get with it!"

"Sure, sure." Ellis followed after him automatically. Behind the entrance to the Jiffi-scuttler was a vague circle above the pavement, like the ghost of a soap-bubble.

He hurried up the steps and inside the offices of Terran Development, his mind already on the hard day ahead.

As they were locking up the office and getting ready to go home, Ellis stopped coordinator Patrick Miller in his office. “Say, Mr Miller. You’re also in charge of the research end, aren’t you?”

“Yeah. So?”

“Let me ask you something. Just where does the Jiffi-scuttler go? It must go somewhere.”

“It goes out of this continuum completely.” Miller was impatient to get home. “Into another dimension.”

“I know that. But — *where?”*

Miller unfolded his breast-pocket handkerchief rapidly and spread it out on his desk. “Maybe I can explain it to you this way. Suppose you’re a two dimensional creature and this handkerchief represents your —”

“I’ve seen that a million times,” Ellis said, disappointed. “That’s merely an analogy, and I’m not interested in an analogy. I want a factual answer. Where does my Jiffi-scuttler go, between here and Cedar Groves?”

Miller laughed. “What the hell do you care?”

Ellis became abruptly guarded. He shrugged indifferently. “Just curious. It certainly must go *some place.”*

Miller put his hand on Ellis’s shoulder in a friendly big-brother fashion. “Henry, old man, you just leave that up to us. Okay? We’re the designers, you’re the consumer. Your job is to use the ‘scuttler, try it out for us, report any defects or failure so when we put it on the market next year we’ll be sure there’s nothing wrong with it.”

“As a matter of fact —” Ellis began.

“What is it?”

Ellis clamped his sentence off. “Nothing.” He picked up his briefcase. “Nothing at all. I’ll see you tomorrow. Thanks, Mr Miller. Goodnight.”

He hurried downstairs and out of the TD building. The faint outline of his Jiffi-scuttler was visible in the fading late-afternoon sunlight. The sky was already full of mono jets taking off. Weary workers beginning their long trip back to their homes in the country. The endless commute. Ellis made his way to the hoop and stepped into it. Abruptly the bright sunlight dimmed and faded.

Again he was in the wavery gray tunnel. At the far end flashed a circle of green and white. Rolling green hills and his own house. His backyard. The cedar tree and flower beds. The town of Cedar Groves.

Two steps down the tunnel. Ellis halted, bending over. He studied the floor of the tunnel intently. He studied the misty gray wall, where it rose and flickered — and the thin place. The place he had noticed.

They were still there. *Still?* It was a different bunch. This time ten or eleven of them. Men and women and children. Standing together, gazing up at him with awe and wonder. No more than a half-inch high, each. Tiny distorted figures, shifting and changing shape oddly. Altering colors and hues.

Ellis hurried on. The tiny figures watched him go. A brief glimpse of their microscopic astonishment — and then he was stepping out into his backyard.

He clicked off the Jiffi-scuttler and mounted the back steps. He entered his house, deep in thought.

“Hi,” Mary cried, from the kitchen. She rustled towards him in her hip-length mesh shirt, her arms out. “How was work today?”

“Fine.”

“Is anything wrong? You look — strange.”

“No. No, nothing’s wrong.” Ellis kissed his wife absently on the forehead. “What’s for dinner?”

“Something choice. Siriusian mole steak. One of your favorites. Is that all right?”

“Sure.” Ellis tossed his hat and coat down on the chair. The chair folded them up and put them away. His thoughtful, preoccupied look still remained. “Fine, honey.”

“Are you *sure* there’s nothing wrong? You didn’t get into another argument with Pete Taylor, did you?”

“No. Of course not.” Ellis shook his head in annoyance. “Everything’s all right, honey. Stop needling me.”

“Well, I *hope* so,” Mary said, with a sigh.

The next morning they were waiting for him.

He saw them the first step into the Jiffi-scuttler. A small group waiting within the wavering gray, like bugs caught in a block of jello. They moved jerkily, rapidly, arms and legs pumping in a blur of motion. Trying to attract his attention. Piping wildly in their pathetically faint voices.

Ellis stopped and squatted down. They were putting something through the wall of the tunnel, through the thin place in the gray. It was small, so incredibly small he could scarcely see it. A square of white at the end of a

microscopic pole. They were watching him eagerly, faces alive with fear and hope. Desperate, pleading hope.

Ellis took the tiny square. It came loose like some fragile rose petal from its stalk. Clumsily, he let it drop and had to hunt all round for it. The little figures watched in an agony of dismay as his huge hands moved blindly around the floor of the tunnel. At last he found it and gingerly lifted it up.

It was too small to make out. *Writing?* Some tiny lines — but he couldn't read them. Much too small to read. He got out his wallet and carefully placed the square between the two cards. He restored his wallet to his pocket.

"I'll look at it later," he said.

His voice boomed and echoed up and down the tunnel. At the sound the tiny creatures scattered. They all fled, shrieking in their shrill, piping voices, away from the gray shimmer, into the dimness beyond. In a flash they were gone. Like startled mice. He was alone. Ellis knelt down and put his eye against the gray shimmer, where it was thin. Where they had stood waiting. He could see something dim and distorted, lost in a vague haze. A landscape of some sort. Indistinct. Hard to make out.

Hills. Trees and crops. But so tiny. And dim…

He glanced at his watch. God, it was ten! Hastily he scrambled to his feet and hurried out of the tunnel, on to the blazing New York pavement.

Late. He raced up the stairs of the Terran Development building and down the long corridor to his office.

At lunchtime he stopped in at the Research Labs. "Hey," he called, as Jim Andrews brushed past, loaded down with reports and equipment. "Got a second?"

“What do you want, Henry?”

“I’d like to borrow something. A magnifying glass.” He considered. “Maybe a photon-microscope would be better. One-or two-hundred power.”

“Kids’ stuff.” Jim found him a small microscope. “Slides?”

“Yeah, a couple of blank slides.”

He carried the microscope back to his office. He set it up on his desk, clearing away his paper. As a precaution he sent Miss Nelson, his secretary, out of the room and off to lunch. Then carefully, cautiously, he got the tiny wisp from his wallet and slipped it between two slides.

It was writing, all right. But nothing he could read. Utterly unfamiliar. Complex, interlaced little characters.

For a time he sat thinking. Then he dialed his inter-department vidphone. “Give me the Linguistics Department.”

After a moment Earl Peterson’s good-natured face appeared. “Hi, there, Ellis. What can I do for you?”

Ellis hesitated. He had to do this right. “Say, Earl, old man. Got a little favor to ask you.”

“Like what? Anything to oblige an old pal.”

“You, uh — you have that Machine down there, don’t you? That translating business you use for working over documents from non-Terran cultures?”

“Sure. So?”

“Think I could use it?” He talked fast. “It’s a screwy sort of a deal, Earl. I got this pal living on — uh — Centaurus VI, and he writes me in — uh — you know the Centauran native semantic system, and I —”

“You want the Machine to translate a letter? Sure, I think we could manage it. This once, at least. Bring it down.”

He brought it down. He got Earl to show him how the intake feed worked, and as soon as Earl had turned his back he fed in the tiny square of material. The Linguistics Machine clicked and whirred. Ellis prayed silently that the paper wasn’t too small. Wouldn’t fall out between the relay-probes of the Machine.

But sure enough, after a couple of seconds, a tape unreeled from the output slot. The tape cut itself off and dropped into a basket. The Linguistics Machine turned promptly to other stuff, more vital material from TD’s various export branches.

With trembling fingers Ellis spread out the tape. The words danced before his eyes.

Questions. They were asking him questions. God, it was getting complicated. He read the questions intently, his lips moving. What was he getting himself into? They were expecting answers. He had taken their paper, gone off with it. Probably they would be waiting for him, on his way home.

He returned to his office and dialed his vidphone. “Give me outside,” he ordered.

The regular vid monitor appeared. “Yes, sir?”

“I want the Federal Library of Information,” Ellis said. “Cultural Research Division.”

That night they were waiting, all right. But not the same ones. It was odd — each time a different group. Their clothing was slightly different, too. A new hue. And in the background the landscape had also altered slightly. The trees he had seen were gone. The hills were still there, but a different shade. A hazy gray-white. Snow?

He squatted down. He had worked it out with care. The answers from the Federal Library of Information had gone back to the Linguistics Machine for re-translation. The answers were now in the original tongue of the questions — but on a trifle larger piece of paper.

Ellis made like a marble game and flicked the wad of paper through the gray shimmer. It bowled over six or seven of the watching figures and rolled down the side of the hill on which they were standing. After a moment of terrified immobility the figures scampered frantically after it. They disappeared into the vague and invisible depths of their world and Ellis got stiffly to his feet again.

“Well,” he muttered to himself, “that’s that.”

But it wasn’t. The next morning there was a new group — and a new list of questions. The tiny figures pushed their microscopic square of paper through the thin spot in the wall of the tunnel and stood waiting and trembling as Ellis bent over and felt around for it.

He found it — finally. He put it in his wallet and continued on his way, stepping out at New York, frowning. This was getting serious. Was this going to be a full-time job?

But then he grinned. It was the damn oddest thing he had ever heard of. The little rascals were cute, in their own way. Tiny intent faces, screwed up with serious concern. And terror. They were scared of him, really scared. And why not? Compared to them he was a giant.

He conjectured about their world. What kind of planet was theirs? Odd to be so small. But size was a relative matter. Small, though, compared to him. Small and reverent. He could read fear and yearning, gnawing hope, as they pushed up their papers. They were depending on him. Praying he'd give them answers.

Ellis grinned. "Damn unusual job," he said to himself.

"What's this?" Peterson said, when he showed up in the Linguistics Lab at noontime.

"Well, you see, I got another letter from my friend on Centaurus VI."

"Yeah?" A certain suspicion flickered across Peterson's face. "You're not ribbing me, are you, Henry? This Machine has a lot to do, you know. Stuff's coming in all the time. We can't afford to waste any time with —"

"This is really serious stuff, Earl." Ellis patted his wallet. "Very important business. Not just gossip."

"Okay. If you say so." Peterson gave the nod to the team operating the Machine. "Let this guy use the Translator, Tommie."

"Thanks," Ellis murmured.

He went through the routine, getting a translation and then carrying the questions up to his vidphone and passing them over to the Library research staff. By nightfall the answers were back in the original tongue and with them carefully in his wallet, Ellis headed out of the Terran Development building and into his Jiffi-scuttler.

As usual, a new group was waiting.

"Here you go, boys," Ellis boomed, flicking the wad through the thin place in the shimmer. The wad rolled down the microscopic countryside,

bouncing from hill to hill, the little people tumbling jerkily after it in their funny stiff-legged fashion. Ellis watched them go, grinning with interest — and pride.

They really hurried; no doubt about that. He could make them out only vaguely, now. They had raced wildly off away from the shimmer. Only a small portion of their world was tangent to the Jiffi-scuttler, apparently. Only the one spot, where the shimmer was thin. He peered intently through.

They were getting the wad open, now. Three or four of them, unprying the paper and examining the answers.

Ellis swelled with pride as he continued along the tunnel and out into his own backyard. He couldn't read their questions — and when translated, he couldn't answer them. The Linguistics Department did the first part, the Library research staff the rest. Nevertheless, Ellis felt pride. A deep, glowing spot of warmth far down inside him. The expression on their faces. The look they gave him when they saw the answer-wad in his hand. When they realized he was going to answer their questions. And the way they scampered after it. It was sort of — satisfying. It made him feel damn good.

"Not bad," he murmured, opening the back door and entering the house. "Not bad at all."

"What's not bad, dear?" Mary asked, looking quickly up from the table. She laid down her magazine and got to her feet. "Why, you look so *happy!* What is it?"

"Nothing. Nothing at all!" He kissed her warmly on the mouth. "You're looking pretty good tonight yourself, kid."

"Oh, Henry!" Much of Mary blushed prettily. "How sweet."

He surveyed his wife in her two-piece wraparound of clear plastic with appreciation. "Nice looking fragments you have on."

“Why, Henry! What’s come over you? You seem so — so *spirited?*

Ellis grinned. “Oh, I guess I enjoy my job. You know, there’s nothing like taking pride in your work. A job well done, as they say. Work you can be proud of.”

“I thought you always said you were nothing but a cog in a great impersonal machine. Just a sort of cipher.”

“Things are different,” Ellis said firmly. “I’m doing a — uh — a new project. A new assignment.”

“A new assignment?”

“Gathering information. A sort of — creative business. So to speak.”

By the end of the week he had turned over quite a body of information to them.

He began starting for work about nine-thirty. That gave him a whole thirty minutes to spend squatting down on his hands and knees, peering through the thin place in the shimmer. He got so he was pretty good at seeing them and what they were doing in their microscopic world.

Their civilization was somewhat primitive. No doubt of that. By Terran standards it was scarcely a civilization at all. As near as he could tell, they were virtually without scientific techniques; a kind of agrarian culture, rural communism, a monolithic tribal-based organization apparently without too many members.

At least, not at one time. That was the part he didn’t understand. Every time he came past there was a different group of them. No familiar faces. And their world changed, too. The trees, the crops, fauna. The weather, apparently.

Was their time rate different? They moved rapidly, jerkily. Like a vidtape speeded up. And their shrill voices. Maybe that was it. A totally different universe in which the whole time structure was radically different.

As to their attitude towards him, there was no mistaking it. After the first couple of times they began assembling offerings, unbelievably small bits of smoking food, prepared in ovens and on open brick hearths. If he got down with his nose against the gray shimmer he could get a faint whiff of the food. It smelled good. Strong and pungent. Highly spiced. Meat, probably.

On Friday be brought a magnifying glass along and watched them through it. It was meat, all right. They were bringing ant-sized animals to be killed and cooked, leading them up to the ovens. With the magnifying glass he could see more of their faces. They had strange faces. Strong and dark, with a peculiar firm look.

Of course, there was only one look *he* got from them. A combination of fear, reverence, and hope. The look made him feel good. It was a look for him, only. Between themselves they shouted and argued — and sometimes stabbed and fought each other furiously, rolling in their brown robes in a wild tangle. They were a passionate and strong species. He got so he admired them.

Which was good — because it made him feel better. To have the reverent awe of such a proud, sturdy face was really something. There was nothing craven about them.

About the fifth time he came there was a rather attractive structure built. Some kind of temple. A place of religious worship.

To him! They were developing a real religion about him. No doubt of it. He began going to work at nine o’clock, to give himself a full hour with them. They had, by the middle of the second week, a full-sized ritual evolved. Processions, lighted tapers, what seemed to be songs or chants. Priests in long robes. And the spiced offerings.

No idols, though. Apparently he was so big they couldn't make out his appearance. He tried to imagine what it looked like to be on their side of the shimmer. An immense shape looming up above them, beyond a wall of gray haze. An indistinct being, something like themselves, yet not like them at all. A different kind of being, obviously. Larger — but different in other ways. And when he spoke — booming echoes up and down the Jiffi-scuttler. Which still sent them fleeing in panic.

An evolving religion. He was changing them. Through his actual presence and through his answers, the precise, correct responses he obtained from the Federal Library of Information and had the Linguistics Machine translate into their language. Of course, by *their* time-rate they had to wait generations for the answers. But they had become accustomed to it, by now. They waited. They expected. They passed up questions and after a couple of centuries he passed down answers, answers which they no doubt put to good use.

"What in the world?" Mary demanded, as he got home from work an hour late one night. "Where have you been?"

"Working," Ellis said carelessly, removing his hat and coat. He threw himself on the couch. "I'm tired. Really tired." He sighed with relief and motioned for the couch-arm to bring him a whiskey sour.

Mary came over by the couch. "Henry, I'm a little worried."

"Worried?"

"You shouldn't work so hard. You ought to take it easy, more. How long since you've had a real vacation? A trip off Terra. Out of the System. You know, I'd just like to call that fellow Miller and ask him why it's necessary for a man your age to put in so much —"

"A man my age!" Ellis bristled indignantly. "I'm not so old."

“Of course not.” Mary sat down beside him and put her arms around him affectionately. “But you shouldn’t have to do so much. You deserve a rest. Don’t you think?”

“This is different. You don’t understand. This isn’t the same old stuff. Reports and statistics and the damn filing. This is —”

“What is it?”

“This is *different.* I’m not a cog. This gives me something. I can’t explain it to you, I guess. But it’s something I have to do.”

“If you could tell me more about it —”

“I can’t tell you any more about it,” Ellis said. “But there’s nothing in the world like it. I’ve worked twenty-five years for Terran Development. Twenty-five years at the same reports, again and again. Twenty-five years — and I never felt this way.”

“Oh, yeah?” Miller roared. “Don’t give me that! Come clean, Ellis!”

Ellis opened and closed his mouth. “What are you talking about?” Horror rolled through him. “What’s happened?”

“Don’t try to give *me* the runaround.” On the vidscreen Miller’s face was purple. “Come into my office.”

The screen went dead.

Ellis sat stunned at his desk. Gradually, he collected himself and got shakily to his feet. “Good Lord.” Weakly, he wiped cold sweat from his forehead. All at once. Everything in ruins. He was dazed with the shock.

“Anything wrong?” Miss Nelson asked sympathetically.

“No.” Ellis moved numbly towards the door. He was shattered. What had Miller found out? Good God! Was it possible he had —

“Mr Miller looked angry.”

“Yeah.” Ellis moved blindly down the hall, his mind reeling. Miller looked angry all right. Somehow he had found out. But why was he mad? Why did he care? A cold chill settled over Ellis. It looked bad. Miller was his superior — with hiring and firing powers. Maybe he’d done something wrong. Maybe he had somehow broken a law. Committed a crime. But what?

What did Miller care about *them!* What concern was it of Terran Development?

He opened the door to Miller’s office. “Here I am, Mr Miller,” he muttered. “What’s the trouble?”

Miller glowered at him with rage. “All this goofy stuff about your cousin on Proxima.”

“It’s — uh — you mean a business friend on Centaurus VI.”

“You — you swindler!” Miller leaped up. “And after all the Company’s done for you.”

“I don’t understand,” Ellis muttered. “What have —”

“Why do you think we gave you the Jiffi-scuttler in the first place?”

“Why?”

“To *test!* To try out, you wall-eyed Venusian stink-cricket! The Company magnanimously consented to allow you to operate a Jiffi-scuttler

in advance of market presentation, and what do you do? Why, you —”

Ellis started to get indignant. After all, he had been with TD twenty-five years. “You don’t have to be so offensive. I plunked down my thousand gold credits for it.”

“Well, you can just mosey down to the accountant’s office and get your money back. I’ve already sent out a directive for a construction team to crate up your Jiffi-scuttler and bring it back to receiving.”

Ellis was dumbfounded. “But *why?*”

“Why indeed! Because it’s defective. Because it doesn’t work. That’s why.” Miller’s eyes blazed with technological outrage. “The inspection crew found a leak a mile wide in it.” His lip curled. “As if you didn’t know.”

Ellis’s heart sank. “Leak?” he croaked apprehensively.

“Leak. It’s a damn good thing I authorized a periodic inspection. If we depended on people like you to —”

“Are you *sure?* It seemed all right to me. That is, it got me here without any trouble,” Ellis floundered. “Certainly no complaints from my end.”

“No. No complaints from your end. That’s exactly why you’re not getting another one. That’s why you’re taking the monojet transport back home tonight. Because you didn’t report the leak! And if you ever try to put something over on this office again —”

“How do you know I was aware of the — defect?”

Miller sank down in his chair, overcome with fury. “Because,” he said carefully, “of your daily pilgrimage to the Linguistic Machine. With your alleged letter from your grandmother on Betelgeuse II. Which wasn’t any

such thing. Which was an utter fraud. Which you got through the leak in the Jiffi-scuttler!”

“How do you know?” Ellis squeaked boldly, driven to the wall. “So maybe there was a defect. But you can’t prove there’s any connection between your badly constructed Jiffi-scuttler and my —”

“Your missive,” Miller stated, “which you foisted on our Linguistics Machine, was not a non-Terran script. It was not from Centaurus VI. It was not from any non-Terran system. It was ancient Hebrew. And there’s only one place you could have got it, Ellis. So don’t try to kid me.”

“Hebrew!” Ellis exclaimed, startled. He turned white as a sheet. “Good Lord. The other continuum — the fourth dimension. Time, of course.” He trembled. “And the expanding universe. That would explain their size. And it explains why a new group, a new generation —”

“We’re taking enough of a chance as it is, with these Jiffi-scuttlers. Warping a tunnel through other space-time continua.” Miller shook his head warily. “You meddler. You *knew* you were supposed to report any defect.”

“I don’t think I did any harm, did I?” Ellis was suddenly terribly nervous. “They seemed pleased, even grateful. Gosh, I’m sure I didn’t cause any trouble.”

Miller shrieked in insane rage. For a time he danced around the room. Finally he threw something down on his desk, directly in front of Ellis. “No trouble. No, none. *Look* at this. I got this from the Ancient Artifacts Archives.”

“What is it?”

“Look at it! I compared one of your question sheets to this. The same. *Exactly* the same. All your sheets, questions and answers, every one of them’s in here. You multi-legged Ganymedean mange beetle!”

Ellis picked up the book and opened it. As he read the pages a strange look came slowly over his face. “Good Heavens. So they kept a record of what I gave them. They put it all together in a book. Every word of it. And some commentaries, too. It’s all here — every single word. It *did* have an effect, then. They passed it on. Wrote all of it down.”

“Go back to your office. I’m through looking at you for today. I’m through looking at you forever. Your severance check will come through regular channels.”

In a trance, his face flushed with a strange excitement, Ellis gripped the book and moved dazedly towards the door. “Say, Mr Miller. Can I have this? Can I take it along?”

“Sure,” Miller said wearily. “Sure, you can take it. You can read it on your way home tonight. On the public monojet transport.”

“Henry has something to show you,” Mary Ellis whispered excitedly, gripping Mrs Lawrence’s arm. “Make sure you say the right thing.”

“The right thing?” Mrs Lawrence faltered nervously, a trifle uneasy. “What is it? Nothing alive, I hope.”

“No, no.” Mary pushed her towards the study door. “Just smile.” She raised her voice. “Henry, Dorothy Lawrence is here.”

Henry Ellis appeared at the door of his study. He bowed slightly, a dignified figure in silk dressing gown, pipe in his mouth, fountain pen in one hand. “Good evening, Dorothy,” he said in a low, well-modulated voice. “Care to step into my study a moment?”

“Study?” Mrs Lawrence came hesitantly in. “What do you study? I mean, Mary says you’ve been doing something very interesting recently,

now that you're not with — I mean, now that you're home more. She didn't give me any idea what it was, though."

Mrs Lawrence's eyes roved curiously around the study. The study was full of reference volumes, charts, a huge mahogany desk, an atlas, globe, leather chairs, an unbelievably ancient electric typewriter.

"Good Heavens!" she exclaimed. "How odd. All these old things."

Ellis lifted something carefully from the bookcase and held it out to her casually. "By the way — you might glance at this."

"What is it? A book?" Mrs Lawrence took the book and examined it eagerly. "My goodness. Heavy, isn't it?" She read the back, her lips moving. "What does it mean? It looks old. What strange letters! I've never seen anything like it. *Holy Bible."* She glanced up brightly. "What is this?"

Ellis smiled faintly. "Well —"

A light dawned. Mrs Lawrence gasped in revelation. "Good Heavens! You didn't *write* this, did you?"

Ellis's smile broadened into a deprecating blush. A dignified hue of modesty. "Just a little thing I threw together," he murmured indifferently. "My first, as a matter of fact." Thoughtfully, he fingered his fountain pen. "And now, if you'll excuse me, I really should be getting back to my work…"

Notes

All notes in italics are by Philip K. Dick. The year when the note was written appears in parentheses following the note. Most of these notes were written as story notes for the collections THE BEST OF PHILIP K. DICK (published 1977) and THE GOLDEN MAN (published 1980). A few were written at the request of editors publishing or reprinting a PKD story in a book or magazine.

When there is a date following the name of a story, it is the date the manuscript of that story was first received by Dick's agent, per the records of the Scott Meredith Literary Agency. Absence of a date means no record is available. The name of a magazine followed by a month and year indicates the first published appearance of a story. An alternate name following a story indicates Dick's original name for the story, as shown in the agency records.

These five volumes include all of Philip K. Dick's short fiction, with the exception of short novels later published as or included in novels, childhood writings, and unpublished writings for which manuscripts have not been found. The stories are arranged as closely as possible in chronological order of composition; research for this chronology was done by Gregg Rickman and Paul Williams.

THE COOKIE LADY 8/27/52. *Fantasy Fiction,* June 1953.

BEYOND THE DOOR 8/29/52. *Fantastic Universe,* Jan 1954.

SECOND VARIETY 10/3/52. *Space Science Fiction,* May 1953.

My grand theme — who is human and who only appears (masquerades) as human? — emerges most fully. Unless we can individually and collectively be certain of the answer to this question, we face what is, in my view, the most serious problem possible. Without answering it adequately, we cannot even be certain of our own selves. I cannot even know myself, let alone you. So I keep working on this theme; to me nothing is as important a question. And the answer comes very hard. (1976)

JON'S WORLD ("Jon") 10/21/52. *Time to Come,* edited by August Derleth, New York, 1954.

THE COSMIC POACHERS ("Burglar") 10/22/52. *Imagination,* July 1953.

PROGENY 11/3/52. *If,* Nov 1954.

SOME KINDS OF LIFE (The Beleaguered") 11/3/52. *Fantastic Universe,* Oct-Nov 1953 [under the pseudonym Richard Phillips].

MARTIANS COME IN CLOUDS ("The Buggies") 11/5/52. *Fantastic Universe,* June-July 1954.

THE COMMUTER 11/19/52. *Amazing,* Aug-Sept 1953.

THE WORLD SHE WANTED 11/24/52. *Science Fiction Quarterly,* May 1953.

A SURFACE RAID 12/2/52. *Fantastic Universe,* July 1955.

PROJECT: EARTH ("One Who Stole") 1/6/53. *Imagination,* Dec 1953.

THE TROUBLE WITH BUBBLES ("Plaything") 1/13/53. *If,* Sept 1953.

BREAKFAST AT TWILIGHT 1/17/53. *Amazing,* July 1954.

There you are in your home, and the soldiers smash down the door and tell you you're in the middle of World War III. Something's gone wrong with time. I like to fiddle with the idea of basic categories of reality, such as space and time, breaking down. It's my love of chaos, I suppose. (1976)

A PRESENT FOR PAT 1/17/53. *Startling Stories,* Jan 1954.

THE HOOD MAKER ("Immunity") 1/26/53. *Imagination,* June 1955.

OF WITHERED APPLES 1/26/53. *Cosmos Science Fiction and Fantasy,* July 1954.

HUMAN IS 2/2/53. *Startling Stories,* Winter 1955.

To me, this story states my early conclusions as to what is human. I have not really changed my view since I wrote this story, back in the Fifties. It's not what you look like, or what planet you were born on. It's how kind you are. The quality of kindness, to me, distinguishes us from rocks and sticks

and metal, and will forever, whatever shape we take, wherever we go, whatever we become. For me, Human Is *is my credo. May it be yours.* (1976)

ADJUSTMENT TEAM 2/11/53. *Orbit Science Fiction,* Sept-Oct 1954.

THE IMPOSSIBLE PLANET ("Legend") 2/11/53. *Imagination,* Oct 1953.

IMPOSTER 2/24/53. *Astounding,* June 1953.

Here was my first story on the topic of: Am I a human? Or am I just programmed to believe I am human? When you consider that I wrote this back in 1953, it was, if I may say so, a pretty damn good new idea in sf. Of course, by now I've done it to death. But the theme still preoccupies me. It's an important theme because it forces us to ask: What is *a human? And — what isn't?* (1976)

JAMES P. CROW 3/17/53. *Planet Stories,* May 1954.

PLANET FOR TRANSIENTS ("The Itinerants") 3/23/53. *Fantastic Universe,* Oct-Nov 1953. [Parts of this story were adapted for the novel DEUS IRAE.]

SMALL TOWN ("Engineer") 3/23/53. *Amazing,* May 1954.

Here the frustrations of a defeated small person — small in terms of power, in particular power over others — gradually become transformed into something sinister: the force of death. In rereading this story (which is of course a fantasy, not science fiction) I am impressed by the subtle change which takes place in the protagonist from Trod-Upon to Treader. Verne Haskel initially appears as the prototype of the impotent human being, but this conceals a drive at his core self which is anything but weak. It is as if I am saying, The put-upon person may be very dangerous. Be careful as to how you misuse him; he may be a mask for thanatos: the antagonist of life; he may not secretly wish to rule, he may wish to destroy. (1979)

SOUVENIR 3/26/53. *Fantastic Universe,* Oct 1954.

SURVEY TEAM 4/3/53. *Fantastic Universe,* May 1954.

PROMINENT AUTHOR 4/20/53. *If,* May 1954.

The Collected Stories Of Philip K. Dick Vol. 3

Philip K Dick

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by Philip K Dick

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Fair Game

Professor Anthony Douglas lowered gratefully into his red-leather easy chair and sighed. A long sigh, accompanied by labored removal of his shoes and numerous grunts as he kicked them into the corner. He folded his hands across his ample middle and lay back, eyes closed.

"Tired?" Laura Douglas asked, turning from the kitchen stove a moment, her dark eyes sympathetic.

"You're darn right." Douglas surveyed the evening paper across from him on the couch. Was it worth it? No, not really. He felt around in his coat pocket for his cigarettes and lit up slowly, leisurely. "Yeah, I'm tired, all right. We're starting a whole new line of research. Whole flock of bright young men in from Washington today. Briefcases and slide rules."

"Not —"

"Oh, I'm still in charge." Professor Douglas grinned expansively. "Perish the thought." Pale gray cigarette smoke billowed around him. "It'll be another few years before they're ahead of me. They'll have to sharpen up their slide rules just a little bit more…"

His wife smiled and continued preparing dinner. Maybe it was the atmosphere of the little Colorado town. The sturdy, impassive mountain peaks around them. The thin, chill air. The quiet citizens. In any case, her husband seemed utterly unbothered by the tensions and doubts that pressured other members of his profession. A lot of aggressive newcomers were swelling the ranks of nuclear physics these days. Old-timers were tottering in their positions, abruptly insecure. Every college, every physics department and lab was being invaded by the new horde of skilled young men. Even here at Bryant College, so far off the beaten track.

But if Anthony Douglas worried, he never let it show. He rested happily in his easy chair, eyes shut, a blissful smile on his face. He was tired — but at peace. He sighed again, this time more from pleasure than fatigue.

"It's true," he murmured lazily. "I may be old enough to be their father, but I'm still a few jumps ahead of them. Of course, I know the ropes better. And —"

"And the wires. The ones worth pulling."

"Those, too. In any case, I think I'll come off from this new line we're doing just about…"

His voice trailed off.

"What's the matter?" Laura asked.

Douglas half rose from his chair. His face had gone suddenly white. He stared in horror, gripping the arms of his chair, his mouth opening and closing.

At the window was a great eye. An immense eye that gazed into the room intently, studying him. The eye filled the whole window.

"Good God!" Douglas cried.

The eye withdrew. Outside there was only the evening gloom, the dark hills and trees, the street. Douglas sank down slowly in his chair.

"What was it?" Laura demanded sharply. "What did you see? Was somebody out there?"

Douglas clasped and unclasped his hands. His lips twitched violently. "I'm telling you the truth, Bill. I saw it myself. It was real. I wouldn't say

so, otherwise. You know that. Don't you believe me?"

"Did anybody else see it?" Professor William Henderson asked, chewing his pencil thoughtfully. He had cleared a place on the dinner table, pushed back his plate and silver and laid out his notebook. "Did Laura see it?"

"No. Laura had her back turned."

"What time was it?"

"Half an hour ago. I had just got home. About six-thirty. I had my shoes off, taking it easy." Douglas wiped his forehead with a shaking hand.

"You say it was unattached? There was nothing else? Just the — eye?"

"Just the eye. One huge eye looking in at me. Taking in everything. As if…"

"As if what?"

"As if it was looking down a microscope."

Silence.

From across the table, Henderson's red-haired wife spoke up. "You always were a strict empiricist, Doug. You never went in for any nonsense before. But this… It's too bad nobody else saw it."

"Of course nobody else saw it!"

"What do you mean?"

"The damn thing was looking at *me*. It was *me* it was studying." Douglas's voice rose hysterically. "How do you think I feel — scrutinized

by an eye as big as a piano! My God, if I weren't so well integrated, I'd be out of my mind!"

Henderson and his wife exchanged glances. Bill, dark-haired and handsome, ten years Douglas's junior. Vivacious Jean Henderson, lecturer in child psychology, lithe and full-bosomed in her nylon blouse and slacks.

"What do you make of this?" Bill asked her. "This is more along your line."

"It's *your* line," Douglas snapped. "Don't try to pass this off as a morbid projection. I came to you because you're head of the Biology Department."

"You think it's an animal? A giant sloth or something?"

"It must be an animal."

"Maybe it's a joke," Jean suggested. "Or an advertising sign. An oculist's display. Somebody may have been carrying it past the window."

Douglas took a firm grip on himself. "The eye was alive. It looked at me. It considered me. Then it withdrew. As if it had moved away from the lens." He shuddered. "I tell you it was *studying* me!"

"You only?"

"Me. Nobody else."

"You seem curiously convinced it was looking down from above," Jean said.

"Yes, down. Down at me. That's right." An odd expression flickered across Douglas's face. "You have it, Jean. As if it came from up there." He jerked his hand upward.

“Maybe it was God,” Bill said thoughtfully.

Douglas said nothing. His face turned ash white and his teeth chattered.

“Nonsense,” Jean said. “God is a psychological transcendent symbol expressing unconscious forces.”

“Did it look at you accusingly?” asked Bill. “As if you’d done something wrong?”

“No. With interest. With considerable interest.” Douglas raised himself. “I have to get back. Laura thinks I’m having some kind of fit. I haven’t told her, of course. She’s not scientifically disciplined. She wouldn’t be able to handle such a concept.”

“It’s a little tough even for us,” Bill said.

Douglas moved nervously toward the door. “You can’t think of any explanation? Something thought extinct that might still be roaming around these mountains?”

“None that we know of. If I should hear of any —”

“You said it looked down,” Jean said. “Not bending down to peer in at you. Then it couldn’t have been an animal or terrestrial being.” She was deep in thought. “Maybe we’re being observed.”

“Not you,” Douglas said miserably. “Just me.”

“By another race,” Bill put in. “You think —”

“Maybe it’s an eye from Mars.”

Douglas opened the front door carefully and peered out. The night was black. A faint wind moved through the trees and along the highway. His car was dimly visible, a black square against the hills. “If you think of anything, call me.”

“Take a couple of phenobarbitals before you hit the sack,” Jean suggested. “Calm your nerves.”

Douglas was out on the porch. “Good idea. Thanks.” He shook his head. “Maybe I’m out of my mind. Good Lord. Well, I’ll see you later.”

He walked down the steps, gripping the rail tightly. “Good night!” Bill called. The door closed and the porch light clicked off.

Douglas went cautiously toward his car. He reached out into the darkness, feeling for the door handle. One step. Two steps. It was silly. A grown man — practically middle-aged — in the twentieth century. Three steps.

He found the door and opened it, sliding quickly inside and locking it after him. He breathed a silent prayer of thanks as he snapped on the motor and the headlights. Silly as hell. A giant eye. A stunt of some sort.

He turned the thoughts over in his mind. Students? Jokesters? Communists? A plot to drive him out of his mind? He was important. Probably the most important nuclear physicist in the country. And this new project…

He drove the car slowly forward, onto the silent highway. He watched each bush and tree as the car gained speed.

A Communist plot. Some of the students were in a left-wing club. Some sort of Marxist study group. Maybe they had rigged up —

In the glare of the headlights something glittered. Something at the edge of the highway.

Douglas gazed at it, transfixed. Something square, a long block in the weeds at the side of the highway, where the great dark trees began. It glittered and shimmered. He slowed down, almost to a stop.

A bar of gold, lying at the edge of the road.

It was incredible. Slowly, Professor Douglas rolled down the window and peered out. Was it really gold? He laughed nervously. Probably not. He had often seen gold, of course. This *looked* like gold. But maybe it was lead, an ingot of lead with a gilt coating.

But — why?

A joke. A prank. College kids. They must have seen his car go past toward the Hendersons' and knew he'd soon be driving back.

Or — or it really *was* gold. Maybe an armored car had gone past. Turned the corner too swiftly. The ingot had slid out and fallen into the weeds. In that case there was a little fortune lying there, in the darkness at the edge of the highway.

But it was illegal to possess gold. He'd have to return it to the Government. But couldn't he saw off just a little piece? And if he did return it there was no doubt a reward of some kind. Probably several thousand dollars.

A mad scheme flashed briefly through his mind. Get the ingot, crate it up, fly it to Mexico, out of the country. Eric Barnes owned a Piper Cub. He could easily get it into Mexico. Sell it. Retire. Live in comfort the rest of his life.

Professor Douglas snorted angrily. It was his duty to return it. Call the Denver Mint, tell them about it. Or the police department. He reversed his car and backed up until he was even with the metal bar. He turned off the motor and slid out onto the dark highway. He had a job to do. As a loyal citizen — and, God knew, fifty tests had shown he *was* loyal — there was a job for him here. He leaned into the car and fumbled in the dashboard for the flashlight. If somebody had lost a bar of gold, it was up to him…

A bar of gold. Impossible. A slow, cold chill settled over him, numbing his heart. A tiny voice in the back of his mind spoke clearly and rationally to him: *Who would walk off and leave an ingot of gold?*

Something was going on.

Fear gripped him. He stood frozen, trembling with terror. The dark, deserted highway. The silent mountains. He was alone. A perfect spot. If they wanted to get him —

They?

Who?

He looked quickly around. Hiding in the trees, most likely. Waiting for him. Waiting for him to cross the highway, leave the road and enter the woods. Bend down and try to pick up the ingot. One quick blow as he bent over; that would be it.

Douglas scrambled back into his car and snapped on the motor. He raced the motor and released the brake. The car jerked forward and gained speed. His hands shaking, Douglas bore down desperately on the wheel. He had to get out. Get away before — whoever they were got him.

As he shifted into high he took one last look back, peering around through the open window. The ingot was still there, still glowing among the dark weeds at the edge of the highway. But there was a strange vagueness about it, an uncertain waver in the nearby atmosphere.

Abruptly the ingot faded and disappeared. Its glow receded into darkness.

Douglas glanced up, and gasped in horror.

In the sky above him, something blotted out the stars. A great shape, so huge it staggered him. The shape moved, a disembodied circle of living presence, directly over his head.

A face. A gigantic, cosmic face peering down. Like some great moon, blotting out everything else. The face hung for an instant, intent on him — on the spot he had just vacated. Then the face, like the ingot, faded and sank into darkness.

The stars returned. He was alone.

Douglas sank back against the seat. The car veered crazily and roared down the highway. His hands slid from the wheel and dropped at his sides. He caught the wheel again, just in time.

There was no doubt about it. Somebody was after him. Trying to get him. But no Communists or student practical jokers. Or any beast, lingering from the dim past.

Whatever it was, whoever they were, had nothing to do with Earth. It — they — were from some other world. They were out to get him.

Him.

But — why?

Pete Berg listened closely. “Go on,” he said when Douglas halted.

“That’s all.” Douglas turned to Bill Henderson. “Don’t try to tell me I’m out of my mind. I really saw it. It was looking down at me. The whole face this time, not just the eye.”

“You think this was the face that the eye belonged to?” Jean Henderson asked.

“I know it. The face had the same expression as the eye. Studying me.”

“We’ve got to call the police,” Laura Douglas said in a thin, clipped voice. “This can’t go on. If somebody’s out to get him —”

“The police won’t do any good.” Bill Henderson paced back and forth. It was late, after midnight. All the lights in the Douglas house were on. In one corner old Milton Erick, head of the Math Department, sat curled up, taking everything in, his wrinkled face expressionless.

“We can assume,” Professor Erick said calmly, removing his pipe from between his yellow teeth, “they’re a nonterrestrial race. Their size and their position indicate they’re not Earthbound in any sense.”

“But they can’t just *stand* in the sky!” Jean exploded. “There’s nothing up there!”

“There may be other configurations of matter not normally connected or related to our own. An endless or multiple coexistence of universe systems, lying along a plane of coordinates totally unexplainable in present terms. Due to some singular juxtaposition of tangents, we are, at this moment, in contact with one of these other configurations.”

“He means,” Bill Henderson explained, “that these people after Doug don’t belong to our universe. They come from a different dimension entirely.”

“The face wavered,” Douglas murmured. “The gold and the face both wavered and faded out.”

“Withdrew,” Erick stated. “Returned to their own universe. They have entry into ours at will, it would seem, a hole, so to speak, that they can enter through and return again.”

“It’s a pity,” Jean said, “they’re so damn big. If they were smaller —”

“Size is in their favor,” Erick admitted. “An unfortunate circumstance.”

“All this academic wrangling!” Laura cried wildly. “We sit here working out theories and meanwhile they are after him!”

“This might explain gods,” Bill said suddenly.

“Gods?”

Bill nodded. “Don’t you see? In the past these beings looked across the nexus at us, into our universe. Maybe even stepped down. Primitive people saw them and weren’t able to explain them. They built religions around them. Worshipped them.”

“Mount Olympus,” Jean said. “Of course. And Moses met God at the top of Mount Sinai. We’re high up in the Rockies. Maybe contact only comes at high places. In the mountains, like this.”

“And the Tibetan monks are situated in the highest land mass in the world,” Bill added. “That whole area. The highest and the oldest part of the world. All the great religions have been revealed in the mountains. Brought down by people who saw God and carried the word back.”

“What I can’t understand,” Laura said, “is why they want *him.”* She spread her hands helplessly. “Why not somebody else? Why do they have to single him out?”

Bill’s face was hard. “I think that’s pretty clear.”

“Explain,” Erick rumbled.

“What is Doug? About the best nuclear physicist in the world. Working on top-secret projects in nuclear fission. Advanced research. The Government is underwriting everything Bryant College is doing because Douglas is here.”

“So?”

“They want him because of his ability. Because he *knows* things. Because of their size-relationship to this universe, they can subject our lives to as careful a scrutiny as we maintain in the biology labs of — well, of a culture of Sarcina Pulmonum. But that doesn’t mean they’re culturally advanced over us.”

“Of course!” Pete Berg exclaimed. “They want Doug for his knowledge. They want to pirate him off and make use of his mind for their own cultures.”

“Parasites!” Jean gasped. “They must have always depended on us. Don’t you see? Men in the past who have disappeared, spirited off by these creatures.” She shivered. “They probably regard us as some sort of testing ground, where techniques and knowledge are painfully developed — for their benefit.”

Douglas started to answer, but the words never escaped his mouth. He sat rigid in his chair, his head turned to one side.

Outside, in the darkness beyond the house, someone was calling his name.

He got up and moved toward the door. They were all staring at him in amazement.

“What is it?” Bill demanded. “What’s the matter, Doug?”

Laura caught his arm. “What’s wrong? Are you sick? Say something! *Doug!”*

Professor Douglas jerked free and pulled open the front door. He stepped out onto the porch. There was a faint moon. A soft light hovered over everything.

“Professor Douglas!” The voice again, sweet and fresh — a girl’s voice.

Outlined by the moonlight, at the foot of the porch steps, stood a girl. Blonde-haired, perhaps twenty years old. In a checkered skirt, pale Angora sweater, a silk kerchief around her neck. She was waving at him anxiously, her small face pleading.

“Professor, do you have a minute? Something terrible has gone wrong with…” Her voice trailed off as she moved nervously away from the house, into the darkness.

“What’s the matter?” he shouted.

He could hear her voice faintly. She was moving off.

Douglas was torn with indecision. He hesitated, then hurried impatiently down the stairs after her. The girl retreated from him, wringing her hands together, her full lips twisting wildly with despair. Under her sweater, her breasts rose and fell in an agony of terror, each quiver sharply etched by the moonlight.

“What is it?” Douglas cried. “What’s wrong?” He hurried angrily after her. “For God’s sake, stand still!”

The girl was still moving away, drawing him farther and farther away from the house, toward the great green expanse of lawn, the beginning of the campus. Douglas was overcome with annoyance. Damn the girl! Why couldn't she wait for him?

"Hold on a minute!" he said, hurrying after her. He started out onto the dark lawn, puffing with exertion. "Who are you? What the hell do you —"

There was a flash. A bolt of blinding light crashed past him and seared a smoking pit in the lawn a few feet away.

Douglas halted, dumfounded. A second bolt came, this one just ahead of him. The wave of heat threw him back. He stumbled and half fell. The girl had abruptly stopped. She stood silent and unmoving, her face expressionless. There was a peculiar waxy quality to her. She had become, all at once, utterly inanimate.

But he had no time to think about that. Douglas turned and lumbered back toward the house. A third bolt came, striking just ahead of him. He veered to the right and threw himself into the shrubs growing near the wall. Rolling and gasping, he pressed against the concrete side of the house, squeezing next to it as hard as he could.

There was a sudden shimmer in the star-studded sky above him. A faint motion. Then nothing. He was alone. The bolts ceased. And —

The girl was gone, also.

A decoy. A clever imitation to lure him away from the house, so he'd move out into the open where they could take a shot at him.

He got shakily to his feet and edged around the side of the house. Bill Henderson and Laura and Berg were on the porch, talking nervously and looking around for him. There was his car, parked in the driveway. Maybe, if he could reach it —

He peered up at the sky. Only stars. No hint of them. If he could get in his car and drive off, down the highway, away from the mountains, toward Denver, where it was lower, maybe he'd be safe.

He took a deep, shuddering breath. Only ten yards to the car. Thirty feet. If he could once get in it —

He ran. Fast. Down the path and along the driveway. He grabbed open the car door and leaped inside. With one quick motion he threw the switch and released the brake.

The car glided forward. The motor came on with a sputter. Douglas bore down desperately on the gas. The car leaped forward. On the porch, Laura shrieked and started down the stairs. Her cry and Bill's startled shout were lost in the roar of the engine.

A moment later he was on the highway, racing away from town, down the long, curving road toward Denver.

He could call Laura from Denver. She could join him. They could take the train east. The hell with Bryant College. His life was at stake. He drove for hours without stopping, through the night. The sun came up and rose slowly in the sky. More cars were on the road now. He passed a couple of diesel trucks rumbling slowly and cumbersomely along.

He was beginning to feel a little better. The mountains were behind. More distance between him and them…

His spirits rose as the day warmed. There were hundreds of universities and laboratories scattered around the country. He could easily continue with his work someplace else. They'd never get him, once he was out of the mountains.

He slowed his car down. The gas gauge was near empty.

To the right of the road was a filling station and a small roadside cafe. The sight of the cafe reminded him he hadn't eaten breakfast. His stomach

was beginning to protest. There were a couple of cars pulled up in front of the cafe. A few people were sitting inside at the counter.

He turned off the highway and coasted into the gas station.

“Fill her up!” he called to the attendant. He got out on the hot gravel, leaving the car in gear. His mouth watered. A plateful of hotcakes, side order of ham, steaming black coffee… “Can I leave her here?”

“The car?” The white-clad attendant unscrewed the cap and began filling the tank. “What do you mean?”

“Fill her up and park her for me. I’ll be out in a few minutes. I want to catch some breakfast.”

“Breakfast?”

Douglas was annoyed. What was the matter with the man? He indicated the cafe. A truck driver had pushed the screen door open and was standing on the step, picking his teeth thoughtfully. Inside, the waitress hustled back and forth. He could already smell the coffee, the bacon frying on the griddle. A faint tinny sound of a jukebox drifted out. A warm, friendly sound. “The cafe.”

The attendant stopped pumping gas. He put down the hose slowly and turned toward Douglas, a strange expression on his face. “What cafe?” he said.

The cafe wavered and abruptly winked out. Douglas fought down a scream of terror. Where the cafe had been there was only an open field.

Greenish brown grass. A few rusty tin cans. Bottles. Debris. A leaning fence. Off in the distance, the outline of the mountains.

Douglas tried to get hold of himself. “I’m a little tired,” he muttered. He climbed unsteadily back into the car. “How much?”

“I just hardly began to fill the —”

“Here.” Douglas pushed a bill at him. “Get out of the way.” He turned on the motor and raced out onto the highway, leaving the astonished attendant staring after him.

That had been close. Damn close. A trap. And he had almost stepped inside.

But the thing that really terrified him wasn’t the closeness. *He was out of the mountains and they had still been ahead of him.*

It hadn’t done any good. He wasn’t any safer than last night. They were everywhere.

The car sped along the highway. He was getting near Denver — but so what? It wouldn’t make any difference. He could dig a hole in Death Valley and still not be safe. They were after him and they weren’t going to give up. That much was clear.

He racked his mind desperately. He had to think of something, some way to get loose.

A parasitic culture. A race that preyed on humans, utilized human knowledge and discoveries. Wasn’t that what Bill had said? They were after his know-how, his unique ability and knowledge of nuclear physics. He had been singled out, separated from the pack because of his superior ability and training. They would keep after him until they got him. And then — what?

Horror gripped him. The gold ingot. The decoy. The girl had *looked* perfectly real. The cafe full of people. Even the smells of food. Bacon frying. Steaming coffee.

God, if only he were just an ordinary person, without skill, without special ability. If only —

A sudden flapping sound. The car lurched. Douglas cursed wildly. A flat. Of all times…

Of all times.

Douglas brought the car to a halt at the side of the road. He switched off the motor and put on the brake. For a while he sat in silence. Finally he fumbled in his coat and got out a mashed package of cigarettes. He lit up slowly and then rolled the window down to let in some air.

He was trapped, of course. There was nothing he could do. The flat had obviously been arranged. Something on the road, sprinkled down from above. Tacks, probably.

The highway was deserted. No cars in sight. He was utterly alone, between towns. Denver was thirty miles ahead. No chance of getting there. Nothing around him but terribly level fields, desolated plains.

Nothing but level ground — and the blue sky above.

Douglas peered up. He couldn’t see them, but they were there, waiting for him to get out of his car. His knowledge, his ability, would be utilized by an alien culture. He would become an instrument in their hands. All his learning would be theirs. He would be a slave and nothing more.

Yet, in a way, it was a complement. From a whole society, he alone had been selected. His skill and knowledge, over everything else. A faint glow rose in his cheeks. Probably they had been studying him for some time. The great eye had no doubt often peered down through its telescope, or

microscope, or whatever it was, peered down and seen him. Seen his ability and realized what that would be worth to its own culture.

Douglas opened the car door. He stepped out onto the hot pavement. He dropped his cigarette and calmly stubbed it out. He took a deep breath, stretching and yawning. He could see the tacks now, bright bits of light on the surface of the pavement. Both front tires were flat.

Something shimmered above him. Douglas waited quietly. Now that it had finally come, he was no longer afraid. He watched with a kind of detached curiosity. The something grew. It fanned out over him, swelling and expanding. For a moment it hesitated. Then it descended.

Douglas stood still as the enormous cosmic net closed over him. The strands pressed against him as the net rose. He was going up, heading toward the sky. But he was relaxed, at peace, no longer afraid.

Why be afraid? He would be doing much the same work as always. He would miss Laura and the college, of course, the intellectual companionship of the faculty, the bright faces of the students. But no doubt he would find companionship up above. Persons to work with. Trained minds with which to communicate.

The net was lifting him faster and faster. The ground fell rapidly away. The Earth dwindled from a flat surface to a globe. Douglas watched with professional interest. Above him, beyond the intricate strands of the net, he could see the outline of the other universe, the new world toward which he was heading.

Shapes. Two enormous shapes squatting down. Two incredibly huge figures bending over. One was drawing in the net. The other watched, holding something in its hand. A landscape. Dim forms too vast for Douglas to comprehend.

At last, a thought came. *What a struggle.*

It was worth it, thought the other creature.

Their thoughts roared through him. Powerful thoughts, from immense minds.

I was right. The biggest yet. What a catch!

Must weigh all of twenty-four ragets!

At last!

Suddenly Douglas's composure left him. A chill of horror flashed through his mind. What were they talking about? What did they mean?

But then he was being dumped from the net. He was falling. Something was coming up at him. A flat, shiny surface. What was it?

Oddly, it looked almost like a frying pan.

The Hanging Stranger

At five o’clock Ed Loyce washed up, tossed on his hat and coat, got his car out and headed across town toward his TV sales store. He was tired. His back and shoulders ached from digging dirt out of the basement and wheeling it into the back yard. But for a forty-year-old man he had done okay. Janet could get a new vase with the money he had saved; and he liked the idea of repairing the foundations himself.

It was getting dark. The setting sun cast long rays over the scurrying commuters, tired and grim-faced, women loaded down with bundles and packages, students, swarming home from the university, mixing with clerks and businessmen and drab secretaries. He stopped his Packard for a red light and then started it up again. The store had been open without him; he’d arrive just in time to spell the help for dinner, go over the records of the day, maybe even close a couple of sales himself. He drove slowly past the small square of green in the center of the street, the town park. There were no parking places in front of LOYCE TV SALES AND SERVICE. He cursed under his breath and swung the car in a U-turn. Again he passed the little square of green with its lonely drinking fountain and bench and single lamppost.

From the lamppost something was hanging. A shapeless dark bundle, swinging a little with the wind. Like a dummy of some sort. Loyce rolled down his window and peered out. What the hell was it? A display of some kind? Sometimes the Chamber of Commerce put up displays in the square.

Again he made a U-turn and brought his car around. He passed the park and concentrated on the dark bundle. It wasn’t a dummy. And if it was a display it was a strange kind. The hackles on his neck rose and he swallowed uneasily. Sweat slid out on his face and hands.

It was a body. A human body.

“Look at it!” Loyce snapped. “Come on out here!”

Don Fergusson came slowly out of the store, buttoning his pinstripe coat with dignity. “This is a big deal, Ed. I can’t just leave the guy standing there.”

“See it?” Ed pointed into the gathering gloom. The lamppost jutted up against the sky — the post and the bundle swinging from it. “There it is. How the hell long has it been there?” His voice rose excitedly. “What’s wrong with everybody? They just walk on past!”

Don Fergusson lit a cigarette slowly. “Take it easy, old man. There must be a good reason, or it wouldn’t be there.”

“A reason! What kind of a reason?”

Fergusson shrugged. “Like the time the Traffic Safety Council put that wrecked Buick there. Some sort of civic thing. How would I know?”

Jack Potter from the shoe shop joined them. “What’s up, boys?”

“There’s a body hanging from the lamppost,” Loyce said. “I’m going to call the cops.”

“They must know about it,” Potter said. “Or otherwise it wouldn’t be there.”

“I got to get back in.” Fergusson headed back into the store. “Business before pleasure.”

Loyce began to get hysterical. “You see it? You see it hanging there? A man’s body! A dead man!”

“Sure, Ed. I saw it this afternoon when I went out for coffee.”

“You mean it’s been there all afternoon?”

“Sure. What’s the matter?” Potter glanced at his watch. “Have to run. See you later, Ed.”

Potter hurried off, joining the flow of people moving along the sidewalk. Men and women, passing by the park. A few glanced up curiously at the dark bundle — and then went on. Nobody stopped. Nobody paid any attention.

“I’m going nuts,” Loyce whispered. He made his way to the curb and crossed out into traffic, among the cars. Horns honked angrily at him. He gained the curb and stepped up onto the little square of green.

The man had been middle-aged. His clothing was ripped and torn, a gray suit, splashed and caked with dried mud. A stranger. Loyce had never seen him before. Not a local man. His face was partly turned away, and in the evening wind he spun a little, turning gently, silently. His skin was gouged and cut. Red gashes, deep scratches of congealed blood. A pair of steel-rimmed glasses hung from one ear, dangling foolishly. His eyes bulged. His mouth was open, tongue thick and ugly blue.

“For Heaven’s sake,” Loyce muttered, sickened. He pushed down his nausea and made his way back to the sidewalk. He was shaking all over, with revulsion — and fear.

Why? Who was the man? Why was he hanging there? What did it mean?

And — why didn’t anybody notice?

He bumped into a small man hurrying along the sidewalk. “Watch it!” the man grated. “Oh, it’s you, Ed.”

Ed nodded dazedly. “Hello, Jenkins.”

“What’s the matter?” The stationery clerk caught Ed’s aim “You look sick.”

“The body. There in the park.”

“Sure, Ed.” Jenkins led him into the alcove of LOYCE TV SALES AND SERVICE. “Take it easy.”

Margaret Henderson from the jewelry store joined them. “Something wrong?”

“Ed’s not feeling well.”

Loyce yanked himself free. “How can you stand here? Don’t you see it? For God’s sake —”

“What’s he talking about?” Margaret asked nervously.

“The body!” Ed shouted. “The body hanging there!”

More people collected. “Is he sick? It’s Ed Loyce. You okay, Ed?”

“The body!” Loyce screamed, struggling to get past them. Hands caught at him. He tore loose. “Let me go! The police! Get the police!”

“Ed —”

“Better get a doctor!”

“He must be sick.”

“Or drunk.”

Loyce fought his way through the people. He stumbled and half fell. Through a blur he saw rows of faces, curious, concerned, anxious. Men and women halting to see what the disturbance was. He fought past them toward his store. He could see Fergusson inside talking to a man, showing him an Emerson TV set. Pete Foley in the back at the service counter, setting up a new Philco. Loyce shouted at them frantically. His voice was lost in the roar of traffic and the murmuring around him.

"Do something!" he screamed. "Don't stand there! Do something! Something's wrong! Something's happened! Things are going on!"

The crowd melted respectfully for the two heavyset cops moving efficiently toward Loyce.

"Name?" the cop with the notebook murmured.

"Loyce." He mopped his forehead wearily. "Edward C. Loyce. Listen to me. Back there —"

"Address?" the cop demanded. The police car moved swiftly through traffic, shooting among the cars and buses. Loyce sagged against the seat, exhausted and confused. He took a deep shuddering breath.

"1368 Hurst Road."

"That's here in Pikeville?"

"That's right." Loyce pulled himself up with a violent effort. "Listen to me. Back there. In the square. Hanging from the lamppost —"

"Where were you today?" the cop behind the wheel demanded.

"Where?" Loyce echoed.

"You weren't in your shop, were you?"

“No.” He shook his head. “No, I was home. Down in the basement.”

“In the *basement?”*

“Digging. A new foundation. Getting out the dirt to pour a cement frame. Why? What has that to do with —”

“Was anybody else down there with you?”

“No. My wife was downtown. My kids were at school.” Loyce looked from one heavyset cop to the other. Hope flickered across his face, wild hope. “You mean because I was down there I missed — the explanation? I didn’t get in on it? Like everybody else?”

After a pause the cop with the notebook said: “That’s right. You missed the explanation.”

“Then it’s official? The body — it’s *supposed* to be hanging there?”

“It’s supposed to be hanging there. For everybody to see.”

Ed Loyce grinned weakly. “Good Lord. I guess I sort of went off the deep end. I thought maybe something had happened. You know, something like the Ku Klux Klan. Some kind of violence. Communists or Fascists taking over.” He wiped his face with his breast-pocket handkerchief, his hands shaking. “I’m glad to know it’s on the level.”

“It’s on the level.” The police car was getting near the Hall of Justice. The sun had set. The streets were gloomy and dark. The lights had not yet come on.

“I feel better,” Loyce said. “I was pretty excited there, for a minute. I guess I got all stirred up. Now that I understand, there’s no need to take me

in, is there?”

The two cops said nothing.

“I should be back at my store. The boys haven’t had dinner. I’m all right, now. No more trouble. Is there any need of —”

“This won’t take long,” the cop behind the wheel interrupted. “A short process. Only a few minutes.”

“I hope it’s short,” Loyce muttered. The car slowed down for a stoplight. “I guess I sort of disturbed the peace. Funny, getting excited like that and —”

Loyce yanked the door open. He sprawled out into the street and rolled to his feet. Cars were moving all around him, gaining speed as the light changed. Loyce leaped onto the curb and raced among the people, burrowing into the swarming crowds. Behind him he heard sounds, snouts, people running.

They weren’t cops. He had realized that right away. He knew every cop in Pikeville. A man couldn’t own a store, operate a business in a small town for twenty-five years without getting to know all the cops.

They weren’t cops — and there hadn’t been any explanation. Potter, Fergusson, Jenkins, none of them knew why it was there. They didn’t know — and they didn’t care. *That* was the strange part.

Loyce ducked into a hardware store. He raced toward the back, past the startled clerks and customers, into the shipping room and through the back door. He tripped over a garbage can and ran up a flight of concrete steps. He climbed over a fence and jumped down on the other side, gasping and panting.

There was no sound behind him. He had got away.

He was at the entrance of an alley, dark and strewn with boards and ruined boxes and tires. He could see the street at the far end. A street light wavered and came on. Men and women. Stores. Neon signs. Cars.

And to his right — the police station.

He was close, terribly close. Past the loading platform of a grocery store rose the white concrete side of the Hall of Justice. Barred windows. The police antenna. A great concrete wall rising up in the darkness. A bad place for him to be near. He was too close. He had to keep moving, get farther away from them.

Them?

Loyce moved cautiously down the alley. Beyond the police station was the City Hall, the old-fashioned yellow structure of wood and gilded brass and broad cement steps. He could see the endless rows of offices, dark windows, the cedars and beds of flowers on each side of the entrance.

And — something else.

Above the City Hall was a patch of darkness, a cone of gloom denser than the surrounding night. A prism of black that spread out and was lost into the sky.

He listened. Good God, he could hear something. Something that made him struggle frantically to close his ears, his mind, to shut out the sound. A buzzing. A distant, muted hum like a great swarm of bees.

Loyce gazed up, rigid with horror. The splotch of darkness, hanging over the City Hall. Darkness so thick it seemed almost solid. *In the vortex something moved.* Flickering shapes. Things, descending from the sky, pausing momentarily above the City Hall, fluttering over it in a dense swarm and then dropping silently onto the roof.

Shapes. Fluttering shapes from the sky. From the crack of darkness that hung above him.

He was seeing — them.

For a long time Loyce watched, crouched behind a sagging fence in a pool of scummy water.

They were landing. Coming down in groups, landing on the roof of the City Hall and disappearing inside. They had wings. Like giant insects of some kind. They flew and fluttered and came to rest — and then crawled crab-fashion, sideways, across the roof and into the building.

He was sickened. And fascinated. Cold night wind blew around him and he shuddered. He was tired, dazed with shock. On the front steps of the City Hall were men, standing here and there. Groups of men coming out of the building and halting for a moment before going on.

Were there more of them?

It didn’t seem possible. What he saw descending from the black chasm weren’t men. They were alien — from some other world, some other dimension. Sliding through this slit, this break in the shell of the universe. Entering through this gap, winged insects from another realm of being.

On the steps of the City Hall a group of men broke up. A few moved toward a waiting car. One of the remaining shapes started to reenter the City Hall. It changed its mind and turned to follow the others.

Loyce closed his eyes in horror. His senses reeled. He hung on tight, clutching at the sagging fence. The shape, the man-shape, had abruptly fluttered up and flapped after the others. It flew to the sidewalk and came to rest among them.

Pseudo-men. Imitation men. Insects with ability to disguise themselves as men. Like other insects familiar to Earth. Protective coloration. Mimicry.

Loyce pulled himself away. He got slowly to his feet. It was night. The alley was totally dark. But maybe they could see in the dark. Maybe darkness made no difference to them.

He left the alley cautiously and moved out onto the street. Men and women flowed past, but not so many, now. At the bus stops stood waiting groups. A huge bus lumbered along the street, its lights flashing in the evening gloom.

Loyce moved forward. He pushed his way among those waiting and when the bus halted he boarded it and took a seat in the rear, by the door. A moment later the bus moved into life and rumbled down the street.

Loyce relaxed a little. He studied the people around him. Dulled, tired faces. People going home from work. Quite ordinary faces. None of them paid any attention to him. All sat quietly, sunk down in their seats, jiggling with the motion of the bus.

The man sitting next to him unfolded a newspaper. He began to read the sports section, his lips moving. An ordinary man. Blue suit. Tie. A businessman, or a salesman. On his way home to his wife and family.

Across the aisle a young woman, perhaps twenty. Dark eyes and hair, a package on her lap. Nylons and heels. Red coat and white Angora sweater. Gazing absently ahead of her.

A high school boy in jeans and black jacket.

A great triple-chinned woman with an immense shopping bag loaded with packages and parcels. Her thick face dim with weariness.

Ordinary people. The kind that rode the bus every evening. Going home to their families. To dinner.

Going home — with their minds dead. Controlled, filmed over with the mask of an alien being that had appeared and taken possession of them, their town, their lives. Himself, too. Except that he happened to be deep in his cellar instead of in the store. Somehow, he had been overlooked. They had missed him. Their control wasn't perfect, foolproof.

Maybe there were others.

Hope flickered in Loyce. They weren't omnipotent. They had made a mistake, not got control of him. Their net, their field of control, had passed over him. He had emerged from his cellar as he had gone down. Apparently their power-zone was limited.

A few seats down the aisle a man was watching him. Loyce broke off his chain of thought. A slender man, with dark hair and a small mustache. Well-dressed, brown suit and shiny shoes. A book between his small hands. He was watching Loyce, studying him intently. He turned quickly away.

Loyce tensed. One of *them?* Or — another they had missed?

The man was watching him again. Small dark eyes, alive and clever. Shrewd. A man too shrewd for them — or one of the things itself, an alien insect from beyond.

The bus halted. An elderly man got on slowly and dropped his token into the box. He moved down the aisle and took a seat opposite Loyce.

The elderly man caught the sharp-eyed man's gaze. For a split second something passed between them.

A look rich with meaning.

Loyce got to his feet. The bus was moving. He ran to the door. One step down into the well. He yanked the emergency door release. The rubber door swung open.

"Hey!" the driver shouted, jamming on the brakes. "What the hell —?"

Loyce squirmed through. The bus was slowing down. Houses on all sides. A residential district, lawns and tall apartment buildings. Behind him, the bright-eyed man had leaped up. The elderly man was also on his feet. They were coming after him.

Loyce leaped. He hit the pavement with terrific force and rolled against the curb. Pain lapped over him. Pain and a vast tide of blackness. Desperately, he fought it off. He struggled to his knees and then slid down again. The bus had stopped. People were getting off.

Loyce groped around. His fingers closed over something. A rock, lying in the gutter. He crawled to his feet, grunting with pain. A shape loomed before him. A man, the bright-eyed man with the book.

Loyce kicked. The man gasped and fell. Loyce brought the rock down. The man screamed and tried to roll away. "*Stop!* For God's sake listen —"

He struck again. A hideous crunching sound. The man's voice cut off and dissolved in a bubbling wail. Loyce scrambled up and back. The others were there, now. All around him. He ran, awkwardly, down the sidewalk, up a driveway. None of them followed him. They had stopped and were bending over the inert body of the man with the book, the bright-eyed man who had come after him.

Had he made a mistake?

But it was too late to worry about that. He had to get out — away from them. Out of Pikeville, beyond the crack of darkness, the rent between their world and his.

“Ed!” Janet Loyce backed away nervously. “What is it? What —”

Ed Loyce slammed the door behind him and came into the living room. “Pull down the shades. Quick.”

Janet moved toward the window. “But —”

“Do as I say. Who else is here besides you?”

“Nobody. Just the twins. They’re upstairs in their room. What’s happened? You look so strange. Why are you home?”

Ed locked the front door. He prowled around the house, into the kitchen. From the drawer under the sink he slid out the big butcher knife and ran his finger along it. Sharp. Plenty sharp. He returned to the living room.

“Listen to me,” he said. “I don’t have much time. They know I escaped and they’ll be looking for me.”

“Escaped?” Janet’s face twisted with bewilderment and fear. “Who?”

“The town has been taken over. They’re in control. I’ve got it pretty well figured out. They started at the top, at the City Hall and police department. What they did with the *real* humans they —”

“What are you talking about?”

“We’ve been invaded. From some other universe, some other dimension. They’re insects. Mimicry. And more. Power to control minds. Your mind.”

“My mind?”

“Their entrance is *here,* in Pikeville. They’ve taken over all of you. The whole town — except me. We’re up against an incredibly powerful enemy, but they have their limitations. That’s our hope. They’re limited! They can make mistakes!”

Janet shook her head. “I don’t understand, Ed. You must be insane.”

“Insane? No. Just lucky. If I hadn’t been down in the basement I’d be like all the rest of you.” Loyce peered out the window. “But I can’t stand here talking. Get your coat.”

“My coat?”

“We’re getting out of here. Out of Pikeville. We’ve got to get help. Fight this thing. They *can* be beaten. They’re not infallible. It’s going to be close — but we may make it if we hurry. Come on!” He grabbed her arm roughly. “Get your coat and call the twins. We’re all leaving. Don’t stop to pack. There’s no time for that.”

White-faced, his wife moved toward the closet and got down her coat. “Where are we going?”

Ed pulled open the desk drawer and spilled the contents out onto the floor. He grabbed up a road map and spread it open. “They’ll have the highway covered, of course. But there’s a back road. To Oak Grove. I got onto it once. It’s practically abandoned. Maybe they’ll forget about it.”

“The old Ranch Road? Good Lord — it’s completely closed. Nobody’s supposed to drive over it.”

“I know.” Ed thrust the map grimly into his coat. “That’s our best chance. Now call down the twins and let’s get going. Your car is full of gas, isn’t it?”

Janet was dazed.

“The Chevy? I had it filled up yesterday afternoon.” Janet moved toward the stairs. “Ed, I —”

“Call the twins!” Ed unlocked the front door and peered out. Nothing stirred. No sign of life. All right so far.

“Come on downstairs,” Janet called in a wavering voice. “We’re — going out for a while.”

“Now?” Tommy’s voice came.

“Hurry up,” Ed barked. “Get down here, both of you.”

Tommy appeared at the top of the stairs. “I was doing my homework. We’re starting fractions. Miss Parker says if we don’t get this done —”

“You can forget about fractions.” Ed grabbed his son as he came down the stairs and propelled him toward the door. “Where’s Jim?”

“He’s coming.”

Jim started slowly down the stairs. “What’s up, Dad?”

“We’re going for a ride.”

“A ride? Where?”

Ed turned to Janet. “We’ll leave the lights on. And the TV set. Go turn it on.” He pushed her toward the set. “So they’ll think we’re still —”

He heard the buzz. And dropped instantly, the long butcher knife out. Sickened, he saw it coming down the stairs at him, wings a blur of motion as it aimed itself. It still bore a vague resemblance to Jimmy. It was small, a

baby one. A brief glimpse — the thing hurtling at him, cold, multi-lensed inhuman eyes. Wings, body still clothed in yellow T-shirt and jeans, the mimic outline still stamped on it. A strange half-turn of its body as it reached him. What was it doing?

A stinger.

Loyce stabbed wildly at it. It retreated, buzzing frantically. Loyce rolled and crawled toward the door. Tommy and Janet stood still as statues, faces blank. Watching without expression. Loyce stabbed again. This time the knife connected. The thing shrieked and faltered. It bounced against the wall and fluttered down.

Something lapped through his mind. A wall of force, energy, an alien mind probing into him. He was suddenly paralyzed. The mind entered his own, touched against him briefly, shockingly. An utter alien presence, settling over him — and then it flickered out as the thing collapsed in a broken heap on the rug.

It was dead. He turned it over with his foot. It was an insect, a fly of some kind. Yellow T-shirt, jeans. His son Jimmy… He closed his mind tight. It was too late to think about that. Savagely he scooped up his knife and headed toward the door. Janet and Tommy stood stone-still, neither of them moving.

The car was out. He'd never get through. They'd be waiting for him. It was ten miles on foot. Ten long miles over rough ground, gulleys and open fields and hills of uncut forest. He'd have to go alone.

Loyce opened the door. For a brief second he looked back at his wife and son. Then he slammed the door behind him and raced down the porch steps.

A moment later he was on his way, hurrying swiftly through the darkness toward the edge of town.

The early morning sunlight was blinding. Loyce halted, gasping for breath, swaying back and forth. Sweat ran down in his eyes. His clothing was torn, shredded by the brush and thorns through which he had crawled. Ten miles — on his hands and knees. Crawling, creeping through the night. His shoes were mud-caked. He was scratched and limping, utterly exhausted.

But ahead of him lay Oak Grove.

He took a deep breath and started down the hill. Twice he stumbled and fell, picking himself up and trudging on. His ears rang. Everything receded and wavered. But he was there. He had got out, away from Pikeville.

A farmer in a field gaped at him. From a house a young woman watched in wonder. Loyce reached the road and turned onto it. Ahead of him was a gasoline station and a drive-in. A couple of trucks, some chickens pecking in the dirt, a dog tied with a string.

The white-clad attendant watched suspiciously as he dragged himself up to the station. “Thank God.” He caught hold of the wall. “I didn’t think I was going to make it. They followed me most of the way. I could hear them buzzing. Buzzing and flitting around behind me.”

“What happened?” the attendant demanded. “You in a wreck? A holdup?”

Loyce shook his head wearily. “They have the whole town. The City Hall and the police station. They hung a man from the lamppost. That was the first thing I saw. They’ve got all the roads blocked. I saw them hovering over the cars coming in. About four this morning I got beyond them. I knew it right away. I could feel them leave. And then the sun came up.”

The attendant licked his lip nervously. “You’re out of your head. I better get a doctor.”

“Get me into Oak Grove,” Loyce gasped. He sank down on the gravel. “We’ve got to get started — cleaning them out. Got to get started right away.”

They kept a tape recorder going all the time he talked. When he had finished the Commissioner snapped off the recorder and got to his feet. He stood for a moment, deep in thought. Finally he got out his cigarettes and lit up slowly, a frown on his beefy face.

“You don’t believe me,” Loyce said.

The Commissioner offered him a cigarette. Loyce pushed it impatiently away. “Suit yourself.” The Commissioner moved over to the window and stood for a time looking out at the town of Oak Grove. “I believe you,” he said abruptly.

Loyce sagged. “Thank God.”

“So you got away.” The Commissioner shook his head. “You were down in your cellar instead of at work. A freak chance. One in a million.”

Loyce sipped some of the black coffee they had brought him. “I have a theory,” he murmured.

“What is it?”

“About them. Who they are. They take over one area at a time. Starting at the top — the highest level of authority. Working down from there in a widening circle. When they’re firmly in control they go on to the next town. They spread, slowly, very gradually. I think it’s been going on for a long time.”

“A long time?”

“Thousands of years. I don’t think it’s new.”

“Why do you say that?”

“When I was a kid… A picture they showed us in Bible League. A religious picture — an old print. The enemy gods, defeated by Jehovah. Moloch, Beelzebub, Moab, Baalin, Ashtaroth —”

“So?”

“They were all represented by figures.” Loyce looked up at the Commissioner. “Beelzebub was represented as — a giant fly.”

The Commissioner grunted. “An old struggle.”

“They’ve been defeated. The Bible is an account of their defeats. They make gains — but finally they’re defeated.”

“Why defeated?”

“They can’t get everyone. They didn’t get me. And they never got the Hebrews. The Hebrews carried the message to the whole world. The realization of the danger. The two men on the bus. I think they understood. Had escaped, like I did.” He clenched his fists. “I killed one of them. I made a mistake. I was afraid to take a chance.”

The Commissioner nodded. “Yes, they undoubtedly had escaped, as you did. Freak accidents. But the rest of the town was firmly in control.” He turned from the window, “Well, Mr. Loyce. You seem to have figured everything out.”

“Not everything. The hanging man. The dead man hanging from the lamppost. I don’t understand that. *Why?* Why did they deliberately hang him there?”

“That would seem simple.” The Commissioner smiled faintly. “*Bait.*”

Loyce stiffened. His heart stopped beating. “Bait? What do you mean?”

“To draw you out. Make you declare yourself. So they’d know who was under control — and who had escaped.”

Loyce recoiled with horror. “Then they *expected* failures! They anticipated —” He broke off. “They were ready with a trap.”

“And you showed yourself. You reacted. You made yourself known.” The Commissioner abruptly moved toward the door. “Come along, Loyce. There’s a lot to do. We must get moving. There’s no time to waste.”

Loyce started slowly to his feet, numbed. “And the man. *Who was the man?* I never saw him before. He wasn’t a local man. He was a stranger. All muddy and dirty, his face cut, slashed —”

There was a strange look on the Commissioner’s face as he answered, “Maybe,” he said softly, “you’ll understand that, too. Come along with me, Mr. Loyce.” He held the door open, his eyes gleaming. Loyce caught a glimpse of the street in front of the police station. Policemen, a platform of some sort. A telephone pole — and a rope! “Right this way,” the Commissioner said, smiling coldly.

As the sun set, the vice-president of the Oak Grove Merchants’ Bank came up out of the vault, threw the heavy time locks, put on his hat and coat, and hurried outside onto the sidewalk. Only a few people were there, hurrying home to dinner.

“Good night,” the guard said, locking the door after him.

“Good night,” Clarence Mason murmured. He started along the street toward his car. He was tired. He had been working all day down in the vault, examining the lay-out of the safety deposit boxes to see if there was room for another tier. He was glad to be finished.

At the corner he halted. The street lights had not yet come on. The street was dim. Everything was vague. He looked around — and froze.

From the telephone pole in front of the police station, something large and shapeless hung. It moved a little with the wind.

What the hell was it?

Mason approached it warily. He wanted to get home. He was tired and hungry. He thought of his wife, his kids, a hot meal on the dinner table. But there was something about the dark bundle, something ominous and ugly.

The light was bad; he couldn’t tell what it was. Yet it drew him on, made him move closer for a better look. The shapeless thing made him uneasy. He was frightened by it. Frightened — and fascinated.

And the strange part was that nobody else seemed to notice it.

The Eyes Have It

It was quite by accident I discovered this incredible invasion of Earth by lifeforms from another planet. As yet, I haven't done anything about it; I can't think of anything to do. I wrote to the Government, and they sent back a pamphlet on the repair and maintenance of frame houses. Anyhow, the whole thing is known; I'm not the first to discover it. Maybe it's even under control.

I was sitting in my easychair, idly turning the pages of a paperbacked book someone had left on the bus, when I came across the reference that first put me on the trail. For a moment I didn't respond. It took some time for the full import to sink in. After I'd comprehended, it seemed odd I hadn't noticed it right away.

The reference was clearly to a nonhuman species of incredible properties, not indigenous to Earth. A species, I hasten to point out, customarily masquerading as ordinary human beings. Their disguise, however, became transparent in the face of the following observations by the author. It was at once obvious the author knew everything. Knew everything — and was taking it in his stride. The line (and I tremble remembering it even now) read:

…his eyes slowly roved about the room.

Vague chills assailed me. I tried to picture the eyes. Did they roll like dimes? The passage indicated not; they seemed to move through the air, not over the surface. Rather rapidly, apparently. No one in the story was surprised. That's what tipped me off. No sign of amazement at such an outrageous thing. Later the matter was amplified.

…his eyes moved from person to person.

There it was in a nutshell. The eyes had clearly come apart from the rest of him and were on their own. My heart pounded and my breath choked in my windpipe. I had stumbled on an accidental mention of a totally unfamiliar race. Obviously nonTerrestrial. Yet, to the characters in the book, it was perfectly natural — which suggested they belonged to the same species.

And the author? A slow suspicion burned in my mind. The author was taking it rather *too easily* in his stride. Evidently, he felt this was quite a usual thing. He made absolutely no attempt to conceal this knowledge. The story continued:

…*presently his eyes fastened on Julia.*

Julia, being a lady, had at least the breeding to feel indignant. She is described as blushing and knitting her brows angrily. At this, I sighed with relief. They weren't *all* nonTerrestrials. The narrative continues:

…*slowly, calmly, his eyes examined every inch of her.*

Great Scott! But here the girl turned and stomped off and the matter ended. I lay back in my chair gasping with horror. My wife and family regarded me in wonder.

"What's wrong, dear?" my wife asked.

I couldn't tell her. Knowledge like this was too much for the ordinary run-of-the-mill person. I had to keep it to myself. "Nothing," I gasped. I leaped up, snatched the book, and hurried out of the room.

In the garage, I continued reading. There was more. Trembling, I read the next revealing passage:

…he put his arm around Julia. Presently she asked him if he would remove his arm. He immediately did so, with a smile.

It's not said what was done with the arm after the fellow had removed it. Maybe it was left standing upright in the corner. Maybe it was thrown away. I don't care. In any case, the full meaning was there, staring me right in the face.

Here was a race of creatures capable of removing portions of their anatomy at will. Eyes, arms — and maybe more. Without batting an eyelash. My knowledge of biology came in handy, at this point. Obviously they were simple beings, uni-cellular, some sort of primitive single-celled things. Beings no more developed than starfish. Starfish can do the same thing, you know.

I read on. And came to this incredible revelation, tossed off coolly by the author without the faintest tremor:

…outside the movie theater we split up. Part of us went inside, part over to the cafe for dinner.

Binary fission, obviously. Splitting in half and forming two entities. Probably each lower half went to the cafe, it being farther, and the upper halves to the movies. I read on, hands shaking. I had really stumbled onto something here. My mind reeled as I made out this passage:

…I'm afraid there's no doubt about it. Poor Bibney has lost his head again.

Which was followed by:

… and Bob says he has utterly no guts.

Yet Bibney got around as well as the next person. The next person, however, was just as strange. He was soon described as:

…totally lacking in brains.

There was no doubt of the thing in the next passage. Julia, whom I had thought to be the one normal person, reveals herself as also being an alien lifeform, similar to the rest:

…quite deliberately, Julia had given her heart to the young man.

It didn't relate what the final disposition of the organ was, but I didn't really care. It was evident Julia had gone right on living in her usual manner, like all the others in the book. Without heart, arms, eyes, brains, viscera, dividing up in two when the occasion demanded. Without a qualm.

…thereupon she gave him her hand.

I sickened. The rascal now had her hand, as well as her heart. I shudder to think what he's done with them, by this time.

…he took her arm.

Not content to wait, he had to start dismantling her on his own. Flushing crimson, I slammed the book shut and leaped to my feet. But not in time to escape one last reference to those carefree bits of anatomy whose travels had originally thrown me on the track:

…her eyes followed him all the way down the road and across the meadow.

I rushed from the garage and back inside the warm house, as if the accursed things were following *me*. My wife and children were playing Monopoly in the kitchen. I joined them and played with frantic fervor, brow feverish, teeth chattering.

I had had enough of the thing. I want to hear no more about it. Let them come on. Let them invade Earth. I don’t want to get mixed up in it.

I have absolutely no stomach for it.

The Golden Man

“Is it always hot like this?” the salesman demanded. He addressed everybody at the lunch counter and in the shabby booths against the wall. A middle-aged fat man with a good-natured smile, rumpled gray suit, sweat-stained white shirt, a drooping bowtie, and a Panama hat.

“Only in the summer,” the waitress answered.

None of the others stirred. The teenage boy and girl in one of the booths, eyes fixed intently on each other. Two workmen, sleeves rolled up, arms dark and hairy, eating bean soup and rolls. A lean, weathered farmer. An elderly businessman in a blue-serge suit, vest and pocket watch. A dark rat-faced cab driver drinking coffee. A tired woman who had come in to get off her feet and put down her bundles.

The salesman got out a package of cigarettes. He glanced curiously around the dingy cafe, lit up, leaned his arms on the counter, and said to the man next to him: “What’s the name of this town?”

The man grunted. “Walnut Creek.”

The salesman sipped at his coke for a while, cigarette held loosely between plump white fingers. Presently he reached in his coat and brought out a leather wallet. For a long time he leafed thoughtfully through cards and papers, bits of notes, ticket stubs, endless odds and ends, soiled fragments — and finally a photograph.

He grinned at the photograph, and then began to chuckle, a low moist rasp. “Look at this,” he said to the man beside him.

The man went on reading his newspaper.

“Hey, look at this.” The salesman nudged him with his elbow and pushed the photograph at him. “How’s that strike you?”

Annoyed, the man glanced briefly at the the photograph. It showed a nude woman, from the waist up. Perhaps thirty-five years old. Face turned away. Body white and flabby. With eight breasts.

“Ever seen anything like that?” the salesman chuckled, his little red eyes dancing. His face broke into lewd smiles and again he nudged the man.

“I’ve seen that before.” Disgusted, the man resumed reading his newspaper.

The salesman noticed the lean old farmer was looking at the picture. He passed it genially over to him. “How’s that strike you, pop? Pretty good stuff, eh?”

The farmer examined the picture solemnly. He turned it over, studied the creased back, took a second look at the front, then tossed it to the salesman. It slid from the counter, turned over a couple of times, and fell to the floor face up.

The salesman picked it up and brushed it off. Carefully, almost tenderly, he restored it to his wallet. The waitress’ eyes flickered as she caught a glimpse of it.

“Damn nice,” the salesman observed, with a wink. “Wouldn’t you say so?”

The waitress shrugged indifferently. “I don’t know. I saw a lot of them around Denver. A whole colony.”

“That’s where this was taken. Denver DCA Camp.”

“Any still alive?” the farmer asked.

The salesman laughed harshly. “You kidding?” He made a short, sharp swipe with his hand. “Not any more.”

They were all listening. Even the high school kids in the booth had stopped holding hands and were sitting up straight, eyes wide with fascination.

“Saw a funny kind down near San Diego,” the farmer said. “Last year, some time. Had wings like a bat. Skin, not feathers. Skin and bone wings.”

The rat-eyed taxi driver chimed in. “That’s nothing. There was a two-headed one in Detroit. I saw it on exhibit.”

“Was it alive?” the waitress asked.

“No. They’d already euthed it.”

“In sociology,” the high school boy spoke up, “we saw tapes of a whole lot of them. The winged kind from down south, the big-headed one they found in Germany, an awful-looking one with sort of cones, like an insect. And —”

“The worst of all,” the elderly businessman stated, “are those English ones. That hid out in the coal mines. The ones they didn’t find until last year.” He shook his head. “Forty years, down there in the mines, breeding and developing. Almost a hundred of them. Survivors from a group that went underground during the War.”

“They just found a new kind in Sweden,” the waitress said. “I was reading about it. Controls minds at a distance, they said. Only a couple of them. The DCA got there plenty fast.”

“That’s a variation of the New Zealand type,” one of the workmen said. “It read minds.”

“Reading and controlling are two different things,” the businessman said. “When I hear something like that I’m plenty glad there’s the DCA.”

“There was a type they found right after the War,” the farmer said. “In Siberia. Had the ability to control objects. Psychokinetic ability. The Soviet DCA got it right away. Nobody remembers that any more.”

“I remember that,” the businessman said. “I was just a kid, then. I remember because that was the first deeve I ever heard of. My father called me into the living room and told me and my brothers and sisters. We were still building the house. That was in the days when the DCA inspected everyone and stamped their arms.” He held up his thin, gnarled wrist. “I was stamped there, sixty years ago.”

“Now they just have the birth inspection,” the waitress said. She shivered. “There was one in San Francisco this month. First in over a year. They thought it was over, around here.”

“It’s been dwindling,” the taxi driver said. “Frisco wasn’t too bad hit. Not like some. Not like Detroit.”

“They still get ten or fifteen a year in Detroit,” the high school boy said. “All around there. Lots of pools still left. People go into them, in spite of the robot signs.”

“What kind was this one?” the salesman asked. “The one they found in San Francisco.”

The waitress gestured. “Common type. The kind with no toes. Bent-over. Big eyes.”

“The nocturnal type,” the salesman said.

“The mother had hid it. They say it was three years old. She got the doctor to forge the DCA chit. Old friend of the family.”

The salesman had finished his coke. He sat playing idly with his cigarettes, listening to the hum of talk he had set into motion. The high school boy was leaning excitedly toward the girl across from him, impressing her with his fund of knowledge. The lean farmer and the businessman were huddled together, remembering the old days, the last years of the War, before the first Ten-Year Reconstruction Plan. The taxi driver and the two workmen were swapping yarns about their own experiences.

The salesman caught the waitress’s attention. “I guess,” he said thoughtfully, “that one in Frisco caused quite a stir. Something like that happening so close.”

“Yeah,” the waitress murmured.

“This side of the Bay wasn’t really hit,” the salesman continued. “You never get any of them over here.”

“No.” The waitress moved abruptly. “None in this area. Ever.” She scooped up dirty dishes from the counter and headed toward the back.

“Never?” the salesman asked, surprised. “You’ve never had any deeves on this side of the Bay?”

“No. None.” She disappeared into the back, where the fry cook stood by his burners, white apron and tattooed wrists. Her voice was a little too loud, a little too harsh and strained. It made the farmer pause suddenly and glance up.

Silence dropped like a curtain. All sound cut off instantly. They were all gazing down at their food, suddenly tense and ominous.

“None around here,” the taxi driver said, loudly and clearly, to no one in particular. “None ever.”

“Sure,” the salesman agreed genially. “I was only —”

“Make sure you get that straight,” one of the workmen said.

The salesman blinked. “Sure, buddy. Sure.” He fumbled nervously in his pocket. A quarter and a dime jangled to the floor and he hurriedly scooped them up. “No offense.”

For a moment there was silence. Then the high school boy spoke up, aware for the first time that nobody was saying anything. “I heard something,” he began eagerly, voice full of importance. “Somebody said they saw something up by the Johnson farm that looked like it was one of those —”

“Shut up,” the businessman said, without turning his head.

Scarlet-faced, the boy sagged in his seat. His voice wavered and broke off. He peered hastily down at his hands and swallowed unhappily.

The salesman paid the waitress for his coke. “What’s the quickest road to Frisco?” he began. But the waitress had already turned her back.

The people at the counter were immersed in their food. None of them looked up. They ate in frozen silence. Hostile, unfriendly faces, intent on their food.

The salesman picked up his bulging briefcase, pushed open the screen door, and stepped out into the blazing sunlight. He moved toward his battered 1978 Buick, parked a few meters up. A blue-shirted traffic cop was standing in the shade of an awning, talking languidly to a young woman in a yellow silk dress that clung moistly to her slim body.

The salesman paused a moment before he got into his car. He waved his hand and hailed the policeman. “Say, you know this town pretty good?”

The policeman eyed the salesman’s rumpled gray suit, bowtie, his sweat-stained shirt. The out-of-state license. “What do you want?”

“I’m looking for the Johnson farm,” the salesman said. “Here to see him about some litigation.” He moved toward the policeman, a small white card between his fingers. “I’m his attorney — from the New York Guild. Can you tell me how to get out there? I haven’t been through here in a couple of years.”

Nat Johnson gazed up at the noonday sun and saw that it was good. He sat sprawled out on the bottom step of the porch, a pipe between his yellowed teeth, a lithe, wiry man in red-checkered shirt and canvas jeans, powerful hands, iron-gray hair that was still thick despite sixty-five years of active life.

He was watching the children play. Jean rushed laughing in front of him, bosom heaving under her sweatshirt, black hair streaming behind her. She was sixteen, bright-eyed, legs strong and straight, slim young body bent slightly forward with the weight of the two horseshoes. After her scampered Dave, fourteen, white teeth and black hair, a handsome boy, a son to be proud of. Dave caught up with his sister, passed her, and reached the far peg. He stood waiting, legs apart, hands on his hips, his two horseshoes gripped easily. Gasping, Jean hurried toward him.

“Go ahead!” Dave shouted. “You shoot first. I’m waiting for you.”

“So you can knock them away?”

“So I can knock them closer.”

Jean tossed down one horseshoe and gripped the other with both hands, eyes on the distant peg. Her lithe body bent, one leg slid back, her spine

arched. She took careful aim, closed one eye, and then expertly tossed the shoe. With a clang the shoe struck the distant peg, circled briefly around it, then bounced off again and rolled to one side. A cloud of dust rolled up.

"Not bad," Nat Johnson admitted, from his step. "Too hard, though. Take it easy." His chest swelled with pride as the girl's glistening body took aim and again threw. Two powerful, handsome children, almost ripe, on the verge of adulthood. Playing together in the hot sun.

And there was Cris.

Cris stood by the porch, arms folded. He wasn't playing. He was watching. He had stood there since Dave and Jean had begun playing, the same half-intent, half-remote expression on his finely-cut face. As if he were seeing past them, beyond the two of them. Beyond the field, the barn, the creek bed, the rows of cedars.

"Come on, Cris!" Jean called, as she and Dave moved across the field to collect their horseshoes. "Don't you want to play?"

No, Cris didn't want to play. He never played. He was off in a world of his own, a world into which none of them could come. He never joined in anything, games or chores or family activities. He was by himself always. Remote, detached, aloof. Seeing past everyone and everything — that is, until all at once something clicked and he momentarily rephased, reentered their world briefly.

Nat Johnson reached out and knocked his pipe against the step. He refilled it from his leather tobacco pouch, his eyes on his eldest son. Cris was now moving into life. Heading out onto the field. He walked slowly, arms folded calmly, as if he had, for the moment, descended from his own world into theirs. Jean didn't see him; she had turned her back and was getting ready to pitch.

"Hey," Dave said, startled. "Here's Cris."

Cris reached his sister, stopped, and held out his hand. A great dignified figure, calm and impassive. Uncertainly, Jean gave him one of the horseshoes. “You want this? You want to play?”

Cris said nothing. He bent slightly, a supple arc of his incredibly graceful body, then moved his arm in a blur of speed. The shoe sailed, struck the far peg, and dizzily spun around it. Ringer.

The corners of Dave’s mouth turned down. “What a lousy darn thing.”

“Cris,” Jean reproved. “You don’t play fair.”

No, Cris didn’t play fair. He had watched half an hour — then come out and thrown once. One perfect toss, one dead ringer.

“He never makes a mistake,” Dave complained.

Cris stood, face blank. A golden statue in the mid-day sun. Golden hair, skin, a light down of gold fuzz on his bare arms and legs —

Abruptly he stiffened. Nat sat up, startled. “What is it?” he barked.

Cris turned in a quick circle, magnificent body alert. “Cris!” Jean demanded. “What —”

Cris shot forward. Like a released energy beam he bounded across the field, over the fence, into the barn and out the other side. His flying figure seemed to skim over the dry grass as he descended into the barren creek bed, between the cedars. A momentary flash of gold — and he was gone. Vanished. There was no sound. No motion. He had utterly melted into the scenery.

“What was it this time?” Jean asked wearily. She came over to her father and threw herself down in the shade. Sweat glowed on her smooth neck and upper lip; her sweat shirt was streaked and damp. “What did he see?”

“He was after something,” Dave stated, coming up.

Nat grunted. “Maybe. There’s no telling.”

“I guess I better tell Mom not to set a place for him,” Jean said. “He probably won’t be back.”

Anger and futility descended over Nat Johnson. No, he wouldn’t be back. Not for dinner and probably not the next day — or the one after that. He’d be gone God only knew how long. Or where. Or why. Off by himself, alone some place. “If I thought there was any use,” Nat began, “I’d send you two after him. But there’s no —”

He broke off. A car was coming up the dirt road toward the farmhouse. A dusty, battered old Buick. Behind the wheel sat a plump redfaced man in a gray suit, who waved cheerfully at them as the car sputtered to a stop and the motor died into silence.

“Afternoon,” the man nodded, as he climbed out the car. He tipped his hat pleasantly. He was middle-aged, genial-looking, perspiring freely as he crossed the dry ground toward the porch. “Maybe you folks can help me.”

“What do you want?” Nat Johnson demanded hoarsely. He was frightened. He watched the creek bed out of the corner of his eye, praying silently. God, if only he *stayed* away. Jean was breathing quickly, sharp little gasps. She was terrified. Dave’s face was expressionless, but all color had drained from it. “Who are you?” Nat demanded.

“Name’s Baines. George Baines.” The man held out his hand but Johnson ignored it. “Maybe you’ve heard of me. I own the Pacifica Development Corporation. We built all those little bomb-proof houses just outside town. Those little round ones you see as you come up the main highway from Lafayette.”

“What do you want?” Johnson held his hands steady with an effort. He’d never heard of the man, although he’d noticed the housing tract. It couldn’t be missed — a great ant-heap of ugly pillboxes straddling the highway. Baines looked like the kind of man who’d own them. But what did he want here?

“I’ve bought some land up this way,” Baines was explaining. He rattled a sheaf of crisp papers. “This is the deed, but I’ll be damned if I can find it.” He grinned good-naturedly. “I know it’s around this way, someplace, this side of the State road. According to the clerk at the County Recorder’s Office, a mile or so this side of that hill over there. But I’m no damn good at reading maps.”

“It isn’t around here,” Dave broke in. “There’s only farms around here. Nothing for sale.”

“This is a farm, son,” Baines said genially. “I bought it for myself and my missus. So we could settle down.” He wrinkled his pug nose. “Don’t get the wrong idea — I’m not putting up any tracts around here. This is strictly for myself. An old farmhouse, twenty acres, a pump and a few oak trees —”

“Let me see the deed.” Johnson grabbed the sheaf of papers, and while Baines blinked in astonishment, he leafed rapidly through them. His face hardened and he handed them back. “What are you up to? This deed is for a parcel fifty miles from here.”

“Fifty miles!” Baines was dumbfounded. “No kidding? But the clerk told me —”

Johnson was on his feet. He towered over the fat man. He was in top-notch physical shape — and he was plenty damn suspicious. “Clerk, hell. You get back into your car and drive out of here. I don’t know what you’re after, or what you’re here for, but I want you off my land.”

In Johnson's massive fist something sparkled. A metal tube that gleamed ominously in the mid-day sunlight. Baines saw it — and gulped. "No offense, mister." He backed nervously away. "You folks sure are touchy. Take it easy, will you?"

Johnson said nothing. He gripped the lash-tube tighter and waited for the fat man to leave.

But Baines lingered. "Look, buddy. I've been driving around this furnace five hours, looking for my damn place. Any objection to my using your facilities?"

Johnson eyed him with suspicion. Gradually the suspicion turned to disgust. He shrugged. "Dave, show him where the bathroom is."

"Thanks." Baines grinned thankfully. "And if it wouldn't be too much trouble, maybe a glass of water. I'd be glad to pay you for it." He chuckled knowingly. "Never let the city people get away with anything, eh?"

"Christ." Johnson turned away in revulsion as the fat man lumbered after his son, into the house.

"Dad," Jean whispered. As soon as Baines was inside she hurried up onto the porch, eyes wide with fear. "Dad, do you think he —"

Johnson put his arm around her. "Just hold on tight. He'll be gone, soon."

The girl's dark eyes flashed with mute terror. "Every time the man from the water company, or the tax collector, some tramp, children, *anybody* come around, I get a terrible stab of pain — here." She clutched at her heart, hand against her breasts. "It's been that way thirteen years. How much longer can we keep it going? *How long?*"

The man named Baines emerged gratefully from the bathroom. Dave Johnson stood silently by the door, body rigid, youthful face stony.

"Thanks, son," Baines sighed. "Now where can I get a glass of cold water?" He smacked his thick lips in anticipation. "After you've been driving around the sticks looking for a dump some red-hot real estate agent stuck you with —"

Dave headed into the kitchen. "Mom, this man wants a drink of water. Dad said he could have it."

Dave had turned his back. Baines caught a brief glimpse of the mother, gray-haired, small, moving toward the sink with a glass, face withered and drawn, without expression.

Then Baines hurried from the room down a hall. He passed through a bedroom, pulled a door open, found himself facing a closet. He turned and raced back, through the living room, into a dining room, then another bedroom. In a brief instant he had gone through the whole house.

He peered out a window. The back yard. Remains of a rusting truck. Entrance of an underground bomb shelter. Tin cans. Chickens scratching around. A dog, asleep under a shed. A couple of old auto tires.

He found a door leading out. Soundlessly, he tore the door open and stepped outside. No one was in sight. There was the barn, a leaning, ancient wood structure. Cedar trees beyond, a creek of some kind. What had once been an outhouse.

Baines moved cautiously around the side of the house. He had perhaps thirty seconds. He had left the door of the bathroom closed; the boy would think he had gone back in there. Baines looked into the house through a window. A large closet, filled with old clothing, boxes and bundles of magazines.

He turned and started back. He reached the corner of the house and started around it.

Nat Johnson's gaunt shape loomed up and blocked his way. "All right, Baines. You asked for it."

A pink flash blossomed. It shut out the sunlight in a single blinding burst. Baines leaped back and clawed at his coat pocket. The edge of the flash caught him and he half-fell, stunned by the force. His suit-shield sucked in the energy and discharged it, but the power rattled his teeth and for a moment he jerked like a puppet on a string. Darkness ebbed around him. He could feel the mesh of the shield glow white, as it absorbed the energy and fought to control it.

His own tube came out — and Johnson had no shield. "You're under arrest," Baines muttered grimly. "Put down your tube and your hands up. And call your family." He made a motion with the tube. "Come on, Johnson. Make it snappy."

The lash-tube wavered and then slipped from Johnson's fingers. "You're still alive." Dawning horror crept across his face. "Then you must be —"

Dave and Jean appeared. *"Dad!"*

"Come over here," Baines ordered. "Where's your mother?"

Dave jerked his head numbly. "Inside."

"Get her and bring her here."

"You're DCA," Nat Johnson whispered.

Baines didn't answer. He was doing something with his neck, pulling at the flabby flesh. The wiring of a contact mike glittered as he slipped it from a fold between two chins and into his pocket. From the dirt road came the

sound of motors, sleek purrs that rapidly grew louder. Two teardrops of black metal came gliding up and parked beside the house. Men swarmed out, in the dark gray-green of the Government Civil Police. In the sky swarms of black dots were descending, clouds of ugly flies that darkened the sun as they spilled out men and equipment. The men drifted slowly down.

"He's not here," Baines said, as the first man reached him. "He got away. Inform Wisdom back at the lab."

"We've got this section blocked off."

Baines turned to Nat Johnson, who stood in dazed silence, uncomprehending, his son and daughter beside him. "How did he know we were coming?" Baines demanded.

"I don't know," Johnson muttered. "He just — knew."

"A telepath?"

"I don't know."

Baines shrugged. "We'll know, soon. A clamp is out, all around here. He can't get past, no matter what the hell he can do. Unless he can dematerialize himself."

"What'll you do with him when you — if you catch him?" Jean asked huskily.

"Study him."

"And then kill him?"

“That depends on the lab evaluation. If you could give me more to work on, I could predict better.”

“We can’t tell you anything. We don’t know anything more.” The girl’s voice rose with desperation. “He doesn’t talk.”

Baines jumped. *“What?”*

“He doesn’t talk. He never talked to us. Ever.”

“How old is he?”

“Eighteen.”

“No communication.” Baines was sweating. “In eighteen years there hasn’t been any semantic bridge between you? Does he have *any* contact? Signs? Codes?”

“He — ignores us. He eats here, stays with us. Sometimes he plays when we play. Or sits with us. He’s gone days on end. We’ve never been able to find out what he’s doing — or where. He sleeps in the barn — by himself.”

“Is he really gold-colored?”

“Yes. Skin, eyes, hair, nails. Everything.”

“And he’s large? Well-formed?”

It was a moment before the girl answered. A strange emotion stirred her drawn features, a momentary glow. “He’s incredibly beautiful. A god come down to earth.” Her lips twisted. “You won’t find him. He can do things. Things you have no comprehension of. Powers so far beyond your limited __”

“You don’t think we’ll get him?” Baines frowned. “More teams are landing all the time. You’ve never seen an Agency clamp in operation. We’ve had sixty years to work out all the bugs. If he gets away it’ll be the first time —”

Baines broke off abruptly. Three men were quickly approaching the porch. Two green-clad Civil Police. And a third man between them. A man who moved silently, lithely, a faintly luminous shape that towered above them.

“Cris!” Jean screamed.

“We got him,” one of the police said.

Baines fingered his lash-tube uneasily. “Where? How?”

“He gave himself up,” the policeman answered, voice full of awe. “He came to us voluntarily. Look at him. He’s like a metal statue. Like some sort of — god.”

The golden figure halted for a moment beside Jean. Then it turned slowly, calmly, to face Baines.

“Cris!” Jean shrieked. *“Why did you come back?”*

The same thought was eating at Baines, too. He shoved it aside — for the time being. “Is the jet out front?” he demanded quickly.

“Ready to go,” one of the CP answered.

“Fine.” Baines strode past them, down the steps and onto the dirt field. “Let’s go. I want him taken directly to the lab.” For a moment he studied the massive figure who stood calmly between the two Civil Policemen. Beside him, they seemed to have shrunk, become ungainly and repellent. Like dwarves… What had Jean said? *A god come to earth.* Baines broke

angrily away. “Come on,” he muttered brusquely. “This one may be tough; we’ve never run up against one like it before. We don’t know what the hell it can do.”

The chamber was empty, except for the seated figure. Four bare walls, floor and ceiling. A steady glare of white light relentlessly etched every corner of the chamber. Near the top of the far wall ran a narrow slot, the view windows through which the interior of the chamber was scanned.

The seated figure was quiet. He hadn’t moved since the chamber locks had slid into place, since the heavy bolts had fallen from outside and the rows of bright-faced technicians had taken their places at the view windows. He gazed down at the floor, bent forward, hands clasped together, face calm, almost expressionless. In four hours he hadn’t moved a muscle.

“Well?” Baines said. “What have you learned?”

Wisdom grunted sourly. “Not much. If we don’t have him doped out in forty-eight hours we’ll go ahead with the euth. We can’t take any chances.”

“You’re thinking about the Tunis type,” Baines said. He was, too. They had found ten of them, living in the ruins of the abandoned North African town. Their survival method was simple. They killed and absorbed other life forms, then imitated them and took their places. *Chameleons,* they were called. It had cost sixty lives, before the last one was destroyed. Sixty top-level experts, highly trained DCA men.

“Any clues?” Baines asked.

“He’s different as hell. This is going to be tough.” Wisdom thumbed a pile of tape-spools. “This is the complete report, all the material we got from Johnson and his family. We pumped them with the psych-wash, then let them go home. Eighteen years — and no semantic bridge. Yet, he looks fully developed. Mature at thirteen — a shorter, faster life-cycle than ours. But why the mane? All the gold fuzz? Like a Roman monument that’s been gilded.”

“Has the report come in from the analysis room? You had a wave-shot taken, of course.”

“His brain pattern has been fully scanned. But it takes time for them to plot it out. We’re all running around like lunatics while he just sits there!” Wisdom poked a stubby finger at the window. “We caught him easily enough. He can’t have *much,* can he? But I’d like to know what it is. Before we euth him.”

“Maybe we should keep him alive until we know.”

“Euth in forty-eight hours,” Wisdom repeated stubbornly. “Whether we know or not. I don’t like him. He gives me the creeps.”

Wisdom stood chewing nervously on his cigar, a red-haired, beefy-faced man, thick and heavyset, with a barrel chest and cold, shrewd eyes deep-set in his hard face. Ed Wisdom was Director of DCA’s North American Branch. But right now he was worried. His tiny eyes darted back and forth, alarmed flickers of gray in his brutal, massive face.

“You think,” Baines said slowly, “this is *it?”*

“I always think so,” Wisdom snapped. “I have to think so.”

“I mean —”

“I know what you mean.” Wisdom paced back and forth, among the study tables, technicians at their benches, equipment and humming computers. Buzzing tape-slots and research hook-ups. “This thing lived eighteen years with his family and *they* don’t understand it. *They* don’t know what it has. They know what it does, but not how.”

“What does it do?”

“It knows things.”

“What kind of things?”

Wisdom grabbed his lash-tube from his belt and tossed it on a table. “Here.”

“What?”

“Here.” Wisdom signalled, and a view window was slid back an inch. “Shoot him.”

Baines blinked. “You said forty-eight hours.”

With a curse, Wisdom snatched up the tube, aimed it through the window directly at the seated figure’s back, and squeezed the trigger.

A blinding flash of pink. A cloud of energy blossomed in the center of the chamber. It sparkled, then died into dark ash.

“Good God!” Baines gasped. “You —”

He broke off. The figure was no longer sitting. As Wisdom fired, it had moved in a blur of speed, away from the blast, to the corner of the chamber. Now it was slowly coming back, face blank, still absorbed in thought.

“Fifth time,” Wisdom said, as he put his tube away. “Last time Jamison and I fired together. Missed. He knew exactly when the bolts would hit. And where.”

Baines and Wisdom looked at each other. Both of them were thinking the same thing. “But even reading minds wouldn’t tell him where they were going to hit,” Baines said. “When, maybe. But not where. Could you have called your own shots?”

“Not mine,” Wisdom answered flatly. “I fired fast, damn near at random.” He frowned. “*Random.* We’ll have to make a test of this.” He waved a group of technicians over. “Get a construction team up here. On the double.” He grabbed paper and pen and began sketching.

While construction was going on, Baines met his fiancee in the lobby outside the lab, the great central lounge of the DCA Building.

“How’s it coming?” she asked. Anita Ferris was tall and blonde, blue eyes and a mature, carefully cultivated figure. An attractive, competent-looking woman in her late twenties. She wore a metal foil dress and cape with a red and black stripe on the sleeve, the emblem of the A-Class. Anita was Director of the Semantics Agency, a top-level Government Coordinator. “Anything of interest, this time?”

“Plenty.” Baines guided her from the lobby, into the dim recess of the bar. Music played softly in the background, a shifting variety of patterns formed mathematically. Dim shapes moved expertly through the gloom, from table to table. Silent, efficient robot waiters.

As Anita sipped her Tom Collins, Baines outlined what they had found.

“What are the chances,” Anita asked slowly, “that he’s built up some kind of deflection-cone? There was one kind that warped their environment by direct mental effort. No tools. Direct mind to matter.”

“Psychokinetics?” Baines drummed restlessly on the table top. “I doubt it. The thing has ability to predict, not to control. He can’t stop the beams, but he can sure as hell get out of the way.”

“Does he jump between the molecules?”

Baines wasn’t amused. “This is serious. We’ve handled these things sixty years — longer than you and I have been around added together. Eighty-seven types of deviants have shown up, real mutants that could

reproduce themselves, not mere freaks. This is the eighty-eighth. We've been able to handle each of them in turn. But this —"

"Why are you so worried about this one?"

"First, it's eighteen years old. That in itself is incredible. Its family managed to hide it that long."

"Those women around Denver were older than that. Those ones with —"

"They were in a Government camp. Somebody high up was toying with the idea of allowing them to breed. Some sort of industrial use. We withheld euth for years. But Cris Johnson stayed alive *outside our control.* Those things at Denver were under constant scrutiny."

"Maybe he's harmless. You always assume a deeve is a menace. He might even be beneficial. Somebody thought those women might work in. Maybe this thing has something that would advance the race."

"*Which* race? Not the human race. It's the old 'the operation was a success but the patient died' routine. If we introduce a mutant to keep us going it'll be mutants, not us, who'll inherit the earth. It'll be mutants surviving for their own sake. Don't think for a moment we can put padlocks on them and expect them to serve us. If they're really superior to homo sapiens, they'll win out in even competition. To survive, we've got to cold-deck them right from the start."

"In other words, we'll know homo superior when he comes — by definition. He'll be the one we won't be able to euth."

"That's about it," Baines answered. "Assuming there *is* a homo superior. Maybe there's just homo peculiar. Homo with an improved line."

“The Neanderthal probably thought the Cro-Magnon man had merely an improved line. A little more advanced ability to conjure up symbols and shape flint. From your description, this thing is more radical than a mere improvement.”

“This thing,” Baines said slowly, “has an ability to predict. So far, it’s been able to stay alive. It’s been able to cope with situations better than you or I could. How long do you think we’d stay alive in that chamber, with energy beams blazing down at us? In a sense it’s got the ultimate survival ability. If it can always be accurate —”

A wall-speaker sounded. “Baines, you’re wanted in the lab. Get the hell out of the bar and upramp.”

Baines pushed back his chair and got to his feet. “Come along. You may be interested in seeing what Wisdom has got dreamed up.”

A tight group of top-level DCA officials stood around in a circle, middle-aged, gray-haired, listening to a skinny youth in a white shirt and rolled-up sleeves explaining an elaborate cube of metal and plastic that filled the center of the view-platform. From it jutted an ugly array of tube snouts, gleaming muzzles that disappeared into an intricate maze of wiring.

“This,” the youth was saying briskly, “is the first real test. It fires at random — as nearly random as we can make it, at least. Weighted balls are thrown up in an air stream, then dropped free to fall back and cut relays. They can fall in almost any pattern. The thing fires according to their pattern. Each drop produces a new configuration of timing and position. Ten tubes, in all. Each will be in constant motion.”

“And *nobody* knows how they’ll fire?” Anita asked.

“Nobody.” Wisdom rubbed his thick hands together. “Mind reading won’t help him, not with this thing.”

Anita moved over to the view windows, as the cube was rolled into place. She gasped. “Is that him?”

“What’s wrong?” Baines asked.

Anita’s cheeks were flushed. “Why, I expected a — a *thing*. My God, he’s beautiful! Like a golden statue. Like a deity!”

Baines laughed. “He’s eighteen years old, Anita. Too young for you.”

The woman was still peering through the view window. “Look at him. Eighteen? I don’t believe it.”

Cris Johnson sat in the center of the chamber, on the floor. A posture of contemplation, head bowed, arms folded, legs tucked under him. In the stark glare of the overhead lights his powerful body glowed and rippled, a shimmering figure of downy gold.

“Pretty, isn’t he?” Wisdom muttered. “All right. Start it going.”

“You’re going to *kill* him?” Anita demanded.

“We’re going to try.”

“But he’s —” She broke off uncertainly. “He’s not a monster. He’s not like those others, those hideous things with two heads, or those insects. Or those awful things from Tunis.”

“What is he, then?” Baines asked.

“I don’t know. But you can’t just *kill* him. It’s terrible!”

The cube clicked into life. The muzzles jerked, silently altered position. Three retracted, disappeared into the body of the cube. Others came out.

Quickly, efficiently, they moved into position — and abruptly, without warning, opened fire.

A staggering burst of energy fanned out, a complex pattern that altered each moment, different angles, different velocities, a bewildering blur that cracked from the windows down into the chamber.

The golden figure moved. He dodged back and forth, expertly avoiding the bursts of energy that seared around him on all sides. Rolling clouds of ash obscured him; he was lost in a mist of crackling fire and ash.

“Stop it!” Anita shouted. “For God’s sake, you’ll destroy him!”

The chamber was an inferno of energy. The figure had completely disappeared. Wisdom waited a moment, then nodded to the technicians operating the cube. They touched guide buttons and the muzzles slowed and died. Some sank back into the cube. All became silent. The works of the cube ceased humming.

Cris Johnson was still alive. He emerged from the settling clouds of ash, blackened and singed. But unhurt. He had avoided each beam. He had weaved between them and among them as they came, a dancer leaping over glittering sword-points of pink fire. He had survived.

“No,” Wisdom murmured, shaken and grim. “Not a telepath. Those were at random. No prearranged pattern.”

The three of them looked at each other, dazed and frightened. Anita was trembling. Her face was pale and her blue eyes were wide. “What, then?” She whispered. “What is it? What does he have?”

“He’s a good guesser,” Wisdom suggested.

“He’s not guessing,” Baines answered. “Don’t kid yourself. That’s the whole point.”

“No, he’s not guessing.” Wisdom nodded slowly. “He *knew.* He predicted each strike. I wonder… *Can* he err? *Can* he make a mistake?”

“We caught him,” Baines pointed out.

“You said he came back voluntarily.” There was a strange look on Wisdom’s face. “Did he come back *after* the clamp was up?”

Baines jumped. “Yes, after.”

“He couldn’t have got through the clamp. So he came back.” Wisdom grinned wryly. “The clamp must actually have been perfect. It was supposed to be.”

“If there had been a single hole,” Baines murmured, “he would have known it — gone through.”

Wisdom ordered a group of armed guards over. “Get him out of there. To the euth stage.”

Anita shrieked. “Wisdom, you can’t —”

“He’s too far ahead of us. We can’t compete with him.” Wisdom’s eyes were bleak. “We can only guess what’s going to happen. *He knows.* For him, it’s a sure thing. I don’t think it’ll help him at euth, though. The whole stage is flooded simultaneously. Instantaneous gas, released throughout.” He signalled impatiently to the guards. “Get going. Take him down right away. Don’t waste any time.”

“Can we?” Baines murmured thoughtfully.

The guards took up positions by one of the chamber locks. Cautiously, the tower control slid the lock back. The first two guards stepped cautiously in, lash-tubes ready.

Cris stood in the center of the chamber. His back was to them as they crept toward him. For a moment he was silent, utterly unmoving. The guards fanned out, as more of them entered the chamber. Then —

Anita screamed. Wisdom cursed. The golden figure spun and leaped forward, in a flashing blur of speed. Past the triple line of guards, through the lock and into the corridor.

“Get him!” Baines shouted.

Guards milled everywhere. Flashes of energy lit up the corridor, as the figure raced among them up the ramp.

“No use,” Wisdom said calmly. “We can’t hit him.” He touched a button, then another. “But maybe this will help.”

“What —” Baines began. But the leaping figure shot abruptly at him, straight at him, and he dropped to one side. The figure flashed past. It ran effortlessly, face without expression, dodging and jumping as the energy beams seared around it.

For an instant the golden face loomed up before Baines. It passed and disappeared down a side corridor. Guards rushed after it, kneeling and firing, shouting orders excitedly. In the bowels of the building, heavy guns were rumbling up. Locks slid into place as escape corridors were systematically sealed off.

“Good God,” Baines gasped, as he got to his feet. “Can’t he do anything but run?”

“I gave orders,” Wisdom said, “to have the building isolated. There’s no way out. Nobody comes and nobody goes. He’s loose here in the building — but he won’t get out.”

“If there’s one exit overlooked, he’ll know it,” Anita pointed out shakily.

“We won’t overlook any exit. We got him once; we’ll get him again.”

A messenger robot had come in. Now it presented its message respectfully to Wisdom. “From analysis, sir.”

Wisdom tore the tape open. “Now we’ll know how it thinks.” His hands were shaking. “Maybe we can figure out its blind spot. It may be able to out-think us, but that doesn’t mean it’s invulnerable. It only predicts the future — it can’t change it. If there’s only death ahead, its ability won’t…”

Wisdom’s voice faded into silence. After a moment he passed the tape to Baines.

“I’ll be down in the bar,” Wisdom said. “Getting a good stiff drink.” His face had turned lead-gray. “All I can say is *I hope to hell this isn’t the race to come.”*

“What’s the analysis?” Anita demanded impatiently, peering over Baines’ shoulder. “How does it think?”

“It doesn’t,” Baines said, as he handed the tape back to his boss. “It doesn’t think at all. Virtually no frontal lobe. It’s not a human being — it doesn’t use symbols. It’s nothing but an animal.”

“An animal,” Wisdom said. “With a single highly-developed faculty. Not a superior man. Not a man at all.”

Up and down the corridors of the DCA Building, guards and equipment clanged. Loads of Civil Police were pouring into the building and taking up positions beside the guards. One by one, the corridors and rooms were being inspected and sealed off. Sooner or later the golden figure of Cris Johnson would be located and cornered.

“We were always afraid a mutant with superior intellectual powers would come along,” Baines said reflectively. “A deeve who would be to us what we are to the great apes. Something with a bulging cranium, telepathic ability, a perfect semantic system, ultimate powers of symbolization and calculation. A development along our own path. A better human being.”

“He acts by reflex,” Anita said wonderingly. She had the analysis and was sitting at one of the desks studying it intently. “Reflex — like a lion. A golden lion.” She pushed the tape aside, a strange expression on her face. “The lion god.”

“Beast,” Wisdom corrected tartly. “Blond beast, you mean.”

“He runs fast,” Baines said, “and that’s all. No tools. He doesn’t build anything or utilize anything outside himself. He just stands and waits for the right opportunity and then he runs like hell.”

“This is worse than anything we’ve anticipated,” Wisdom said. His beefy face was lead-gray. He sagged like an old man, his blunt hands trembling and uncertain. “To be replaced by an animal! Something that runs and hides. Something without a language!” He spat savagely. “That’s why they weren’t able to communicate with it. We wondered what kind of semantic system it had. It hasn’t got any! No more ability to talk and think than a — dog.”

“That means intelligence has failed,” Baines went on huskily. “We’re the last of our line — like the dinosaur. We’ve carried intelligence as far as it’ll go. Too far, maybe. We’ve already got to the point where we know so much — think so much — we can’t act.”

“Men of thought,” Anita said. “Not men of action. It’s begun to have a paralyzing effect. But this thing —”

“This thing’s faculty works better than ours ever did. We can recall past experiences, keep them in mind, learn from them. At best, we can make shrewd guesses about the future, from our memory of what’s happened in the past. But we can’t be certain. We have to speak of probabilities. Grays. Not blacks and whites. We’re only guessing.”

“Cris Johnson isn’t guessing,” Anita added.

“He can look ahead. See what’s coming. He can — prethink. Let’s call it that. He can see into the future. Probably he doesn’t perceive it as the future.”

“No,” Anita said thoughtfully. “It would seem like the present. He has a broader present. But his present lies ahead, not back. Our present is related to the past. Only the past is certain, to us. To him, the future is certain. And he probably doesn’t remember the past, any more than any animal remembers what happened.”

“As he develops,” Baines said, “as his race evolves, it’ll probably expand its ability to prethink. Instead of ten minutes, thirty minutes. Then an hour. A day. A year. Eventually they’ll be able to keep ahead a whole lifetime. Each one of them will live in a solid, unchanging world. There’ll be no variables, no uncertainty. No motion! They won’t have anything to fear. Their world will be perfectly static, a solid block of matter.”

“And when death comes,” Anita said, “they’ll accept it. There won’t be any struggle; to them, it’ll already have happened.”

“Already have happened,” Baines repeated. “To Cris, our shots had already been fired.” He laughed harshly. “Superior survival doesn’t mean superior man. If there were another world-wide flood, only fish would survive. If there were another ice age, maybe nothing but polar bears would

be left. When we opened the lock, he had already seen the men, seen exactly where they were standing and what they'd do. A neat faculty — but not a development of mind. A pure physical *sense."*

"But if every exit is covered," Wisdom repeated, "he'll see he can't get out. He gave himself up before — he'll give himself up again." He shook his head. "An animal. Without language. Without tools."

"With his new sense," Baines said, "he doesn't need anything else." He examined his watch. "It's after two. Is the building completely sealed off?"

"You can't leave," Wisdom stated. "You'll have to stay here all night — or until we catch the bastard."

"I meant her." Baines indicated Anita. "She's supposed to be back at Semantics by seven in the morning."

Wisdom shrugged. "I have no control over her. If she wants, she can check out."

"I'll stay," Anita decided. "I want to be here when he — when he's destroyed. I'll sleep here." She hesitated. "Wisdom, isn't there some other way? If he's just an animal couldn't we —"

"A zoo?" Wisdom's voice rose in a frenzy of hysteria. "Keep it penned up in the zoo? Christ no! It's got to be killed!"

For a long time the great gleaming shape crouched in the darkness. He was in a store room. Boxes and cartons stretched out on all sides, heaped up in orderly rows, all neatly counted and marked. Silent and deserted.

But in a few moments people burst in and searched the room. He could see this. He saw them in all parts of the room, clear and distinct, men with lash-tubes, grim-faced, stalking with murder in their eyes.

The sight was one of many. One of a multitude of clearly-etched scenes lying tangent to his own. And to each was attached a further multitude of interlocking scenes, that finally grew hazier and dwindled away. A progressive vagueness, each syndrome less distinct.

But the immediate one, the scene that lay closest to him, was clearly visible. He could easily make out the sight of the armed men. Therefore it was necessary to be out of the room before they appeared.

The golden figure got calmly to its feet and moved to the door. The corridor was empty; he could see himself already outside, in the vacant, drumming hall of metal and recessed lights. He pushed the door boldly open and stepped out.

A lift blinked across the hall. He walked to the lift and entered it. In five minutes a group of guards would come running along and leap into the lift. By that time he would have left it and sent it back down. Now he pressed a button and rose to the next floor.

He stepped out into a deserted passage. No one was in sight. That didn’t surprise him. He couldn’t be surprised. The element didn’t exist for him. The positions of things, the space relationships of all matter in the immediate future, were as certain for him as his own body. The only thing that was unknown was that which had already passed out of being. In a vague, dim fashion, he had occasionally wondered where things went after he had passed them.

He came to a small supply closet. It had just been searched. It would be a half an hour before anyone opened it again. He had that long; he could see that far ahead. And then —

And then he would be able to see another area, a region farther beyond. He was always moving, advancing into new regions he had never seen before. A constantly unfolding panorama of sights and scenes, frozen landscapes spread out ahead. All objects were fixed. Pieces on a vast chess board through which he moved, arms folded, face calm. A detached

observer who saw objects that lay ahead of him as clearly as those under foot.

Right now, as he crouched in the small supply closet, he saw an unusually varied multitude of scenes for the next half hour. Much lay ahead. The half hour was divided into an incredibly complex pattern of separate configurations. He had reached a critical region; he was about to move through worlds of intricate complexity.

He concentrated on a scene ten minutes away. It showed, like a three dimensional still, a heavy gun at the end of the corridor, trained all the way to the far end. Men moved cautiously from door to door, checking each room again, as they had done repeatedly. At the end of the half hour they had reached the supply closet. A scene showed them looking inside. By that time he was gone, of course. He wasn't in that scene. He had passed on to another.

The next scene showed an exit. Guards stood in a solid line. No way out. He was in that scene. Off to one side, in a niche just inside the door. The street outside was visible, stars, lights, outlines of passing cars and people.

In the next tableau he had gone back, away from the exit. There was no way out. In another tableau he saw himself at other exits, a legion of golden figures, duplicated again and again, as he explored regions ahead, one after another. But each exit was covered.

In one dim scene he saw himself lying charred and dead; he had tried to run through the line, out the exit.

But that scene was vague. One wavering, indistinct still out of many. The inflexible path along which he moved would not deviate in that direction. It would not turn him that way. The golden figure in that scene, the miniature doll in that room, was only distantly related to him. It was himself, but a faraway self. A self he would never meet. He forgot it and went on to examine the other tableau.

The myriad of tableaux that surrounded him were an elaborate maze, a web which he now considered bit by bit. He was looking down into a doll's house of infinite rooms, rooms without number, each with its furniture, its dolls, all rigid and unmoving. The same dolls and furniture were repeated in many. He, himself, appeared often. The two men on the platform. The woman. Again and again the same combinations turned up; the play was redone frequently, the same actors and props moved around in all possible ways.

Before it was time to leave the supply closet, Cris Johnson had examined each of the rooms tangent to the one he now occupied. He had consulted each, considered its contents thoroughly.

He pushed the door open and stepped calmly out into the hall. He knew exactly where he was going. And what he had to do. Crouched in the stuffy closet, he had quietly and expertly examined each miniature of himself, observed which clearly-etched configuration lay along his inflexible path, the one room of the doll house, the one set out of legions, toward which he was moving.

Anita slipped out of her metal foil dress, hung it over a hanger, then unfastened her shoes and kicked them under the bed. She was just starting to unclip her bra when the door opened.

She gasped. Soundlessly, calmly, the great golden shape closed the door and bolted it after him.

Anita snatched up her lash-tube from the dressing table. Her hand shook; her whole body was trembling. "What do you want?" she demanded. Her fingers tightened convulsively around the tube. "I'll kill you."

The figure regarded her silently, arms folded. It was the first time she had seen Cris Johnson closely. The great dignified face, handsome and impassive. Broad shoulders. The golden mane of hair, golden skin, pelt of radiant fuzz —

“Why?” she demanded breathlessly. Her heart was pounding wildly. “What do you want?”

She could kill him easily. But the lash-tube wavered. Cris Johnson stood without fear; he wasn’t at all afraid. Why not? Didn’t he understand what it was? What the small metal tube could do to him?

“Of course,” she said suddenly, in a choked whisper. “You can see ahead. You know I’m not going to kill you. Or you wouldn’t have come here.”

She flushed, terrified — and embarrassed. He knew exactly what she was going to do; he could see it as easily as she saw the walls of the room, the wall-bed with its covers folded neatly back, her clothes hanging in the closet, her purse and small things on the dressing table.

“All right.” Anita backed away, then abruptly put the tube down on the dressing table. “I won’t kill you. Why should I?” She fumbled in her purse and got out her cigarettes. Shakily, she lit up, her pulse racing. She was scared. And strangely fascinated. “Do you expect to stay here? It won’t do any good. They’ve come through the dorm twice, already. They’ll be back.”

Could he understand her? She saw nothing on his face, only blank dignity. God, he was huge! It wasn’t possible he was only eighteen, a boy, a child. He looked more like some great golden god, come down to earth.

She shook the thought off savagely. He wasn’t a god. He was a beast. *The blond beast*, come to take the place of man. To drive man from the earth.

Anita snatched up the lash-tube. “Get out of here! You’re an animal! A big stupid animal! You can’t even understand what I’m saying — you don’t even have a language. You’re not human.”

Cris Johnson remained silent. As if he were waiting. Waiting for what? He showed no sign of fear or impatience, even though the corridor outside rang with the sound of men searching, metal against metal, guns and energy tubes being dragged around, shouts and dim rumbles as section after section of the building was searched and sealed off.

“They’ll get you,” Anita said. “You’ll be trapped here. They’ll be searching this wing any moment.” She savagely stubbed out her cigarette. “For God’s sake, what do you expect *me* to do?”

Cris moved toward her. Anita shrank back. His powerful hands caught hold of her and she gasped in sudden terror. For a moment she struggled blindly, desperately.

“Let go!” She broke away and leaped back from him. His face was expressionless. Calmly, he came toward her, an impassive god advancing to take her. “Get away!” She groped for the lash-tube, trying to get up. But the tube slipped from her fingers and rolled onto the floor.

Cris bent down and picked it up. He held it out to her, in the open palm of his hand.

“Good God,” Anita whispered. Shakily, she accepted the tube, gripped it hesitantly, then put it down again on the dressing table.

In the half-light of the room, the great golden figure seemed to glow and shimmer, outlined against the darkness. A god — no, not a god. An animal. A great golden beast, without a soul. She was confused. Which was he — or was he both? She shook her head, bewildered. It was late, almost four. She was exhausted and confused.

Cris took her in his arms. Gently, kindly, he lifted her face and kissed her. His powerful hands held her tight. She couldn’t breathe. Darkness, mixed with the shimmering golden haze, swept around her. Around and around it spiralled, carrying her senses away. She sank down into it gratefully. The darkness covered her and dissolved her in a swelling torrent

of sheer force that mounted in intensity each moment, until the roar of it beat against her and at last blotted out everything.

Anita blinked. She sat up and automatically pushed her hair into place. Cris was standing before the closet. He was reaching up, getting something down.

He turned toward her and tossed something on the bed. Her heavy metal foil traveling cape.

Anita gazed down at the cape without comprehension. “What do you want?”

Cris stood by the bed, waiting.

She picked up the cape uncertainly. Cold creepers of fear plucked at her. “You want me to get you out of here,” she said softly. “Past the guards and the CP.”

Cris said nothing.

“They’ll kill you instantly.” She got unsteadily to her feet. “You can’t run past them. Good God, don’t you do anything but run? There must be a better way. Maybe I can appeal to Wisdom. I’m Class A — Director Class. I can go directly to the Full Directorate. I ought to be able to hold them off, keep back the euth indefinitely. The odds are a billion to one against us if we try to break past —”

She broke off.

“But you don’t gamble,” she continued slowly. “You don’t go by odds. You *know* what’s coming. You’ve seen the cards already.” She studied his face intently. “No, you can’t be cold-decked. It wouldn’t be possible.”

For a moment she stood deep in thought. Then with a quick, decisive motion, she snatched up the cloak and slipped it around her bare shoulders. She fastened the heavy belt, bent down and got her shoes from under the bed, snatched up her purse, and hurried to the door.

"Come on," she said. She was breathing quickly, cheeks flushed. "Let's go. While there are still a number of exits to choose from. My car is parked outside, in the lot at the side of the building. We can get to my place in an hour. I have a winter home in Argentina. If worse comes to worst we can fly there. It's in the back country, away from the cities. Jungle and swamps. Cut-off from almost everything." Eagerly she started to open the door.

Cris reached out and stopped her. Gently, patiently, he moved in front of her.

He waited a long time, body rigid. Then he turned the knob and stepped boldly out into the corridor.

The corridor was empty. No one was in sight. Anita caught a faint glimpse, the back of a guard hurrying off. If they had come out a second earlier —

Cris started down the corridor. She ran after him. He moved rapidly, effortlessly. The girl had trouble keeping up with him. He seemed to know exactly where to go. Off to the right, down a side hall, a supply passage. Onto an ascent freight-lift. They rose, then abruptly halted.

Cris waited again. Presently he slid the door back and moved out of the lift. Anita followed nervously. She could hear sounds: guns and men, very close.

They were near an exit. A double line of guards stood directly ahead. Twenty men, a solid wall — and a massive heavy-duty robot gun in the center. The men were alert, faces strained and tense. Watching wide-eyed, guns gripped tight. A Civil Police officer was in charge.

“We’ll never get past,” Anita gasped. “We wouldn’t get ten feet.” She pulled back. “They’ll —”

Cris took her by the arm and continued calmly forward. Blind terror leaped inside her. She fought wildly to get away, but his fingers were like steel. She couldn’t pry them loose. Quietly, irresistibly, the great golden creature drew her along beside him toward the double line of guards.

“There he is!” Guns went up. Men leaped into action. The barrel of the robot cannon swung around. *“Get him!”*

Anita was paralyzed. She sagged against the powerful body beside her, tugged along helplessly by his inflexible grasp. The lines of guards came nearer, a sheer wall of guns. Anita fought to control her terror. She stumbled, half-fell. Cris supported her effortlessly. She scratched, fought at him, struggled to get loose —

“Don’t shoot!” she screamed.

Guns wavered uncertainly. “Who is she?” The guards were moving around, trying to get a sight on Cris without including her. “Who’s he got there?”

One of them saw the stripe on her sleeve. Red and black. Director Class. Top-level.

“She’s Class A.” Shocked, the guards retreated. “Miss, get out of the way!”

Anita found her voice. “Don’t shoot. He’s — in my custody. You understand? I’m taking him out.”

The wall of guards moved back nervously. “No one’s supposed to pass. Director Wisdom gave orders —”

“I’m not subject to Wisdom’s authority.” She managed to edge her voice with a harsh crispness. “Get out of the way. I’m taking him to the Semantics Agency.”

For a moment nothing happened. There was no reaction. Then slowly, uncertainly, one guard stepped aside.

Cris moved. A blur of speed, away from Anita, past the confused guards, through the breach in the line, out the exit, and onto the street. Bursts of energy flashed wildly after him. Shouting guards milled out. Anita was left behind, forgotten. The guards, the heavy-duty gun, were pouring out into the early morning darkness. Sirens wailed. Patrol cars roared into life.

Anita stood dazed, confused, leaning against the wall, trying to get her breath.

He was gone. He had left her. Good God — what had she done? She shook her head, bewildered, her face buried in her hands. She had been hypnotized. She had lost her will, her common sense. Her reason! The animal, the great golden beast, had tricked her. Taken advantage of her. And now he was gone, escaped into the night.

Miserable, agonized tears trickled through her clenched fingers. She rubbed at them futilely; but they kept on coming.

“He’s gone,” Baines said. “We’ll never get him, now. He’s probably a million miles from here.”

Anita sat huddled in the corner, her face to the wall. A little bent heap, broken and wretched.

Wisdom paced back and forth. “But where can he go? Where can he hide? Nobody’ll hide him! Everybody knows the law about deeves!”

“He’s lived out in the woods most of his life. He’ll hunt — that’s what he’s always done. They wondered what he was up to, off by himself. He was catching game and sleeping under trees.” Baines laughed harshly. “And the first woman he meets will be glad to hide him — as *she* was.” He indicated Anita with a jerk of his thumb.

“So all that gold, that mane, that god-like stance, was *for* something. Not just ornament.” Wisdom’s thick lips twisted. “He doesn’t have just one faculty — he has two. One is new, the newest thing in survival method. The other is old as life.” He stopped pacing to glare at the huddled shape in the corner. “Plumage. Bright feathers, combs for the rooster, swans, birds, bright scales for the fish. Gleaming pelts and manes for the animals. An animal isn’t necessarily *bestial*. Lions aren’t bestial. Or tigers. Or any of the big cats. They’re anything but bestial.”

“He’ll never have to worry,” Baines said. “He’ll get by — as long as human women exist to take care of him. And since he can see ahead, into the future, he already knows he’s sexually irresistible to human females.”

“We’ll get him,” Wisdom muttered. “I’ve had the Government declare an emergency. Military and Civil Police will be looking for him. Armies of men — a whole planet of experts, the most advanced machines and equipment. We’ll flush him, sooner or later.”

“By that time it won’t make any difference,” Baines said. He put his hand on Anita’s shoulder and patted her ironically. “You’ll have company, sweetheart. You won’t be the only one. You’re just the first of a long procession.”

“Thanks,” Anita grated.

“The oldest survival method and the newest. Combined to form one perfectly adapted animal. How the hell are we going to stop him? We can put *you* through a sterilization tank — but we can’t pick them all up, all the women he meets along the way. And if we miss one we’re finished.”

“We’ll have to keep trying,” Wisdom said. “Round up as many as we can. Before they can spawn.” Faint hope glinted in his tired, sagging face. “Maybe his characteristics are recessive. Maybe ours will cancel his out.”

“I wouldn’t lay any money on that,” Baines said. “I think I know already which of the two strains is going to turn up dominant.” He grinned wryly. “I mean, I’m making a good *guess.* It won’t be us.”

The Turning Wheel

Bard Chai said thoughtfully, “Cults.” He examined a tape-report grinding from the receptor. The receptor was rusty and unoiled; it whined piercingly and sent up an acrid wisp of smoke. Chai shut it off as its pitted surface began to heat ugly red. Presently he finished with the tape and tossed it with a heap of refuse jamming the mouth of a disposal slot.

“What about cults?” Bard Sung-wu asked faintly. He brought himself back with an effort, and forced a smile of interest on his plump olive-yellow face. “You were saying?”

“Any stable society is menaced by cults; our society is no exception.” Chai rubbed his finely-tapered fingers together reflectively. “Certain lower strata are axiomatically dissatisfied. Their hearts burn with envy of those the wheel has placed above them; in secret they form fanatic, rebellious bands. They meet in the dark of the night; they insidiously express inversions of accepted norms; they delight in flaunting basic mores and customs.”

“Ugh,” Sung-wu agreed. “I mean,” he explained quickly, “it seems incredible people could practice such fanatic and disgusting rites.” He got nervously to his feet. “I must go, if it’s permitted.”

“Wait,” snapped Chai. “You are familiar with the Detroit area?”

Uneasily, Sung-wu nodded. “Very slightly.”

With characteristic vigor, Chai made his decision. “I’m sending you; investigate and make a blue-slip report. If this group is dangerous, the Holy Arm should know. It’s of the worst elements — the Techno class.” He made a wry face. “Caucasians, hulking, hairy things. We’ll give you six months in Spain, on your return; you can poke over ruins of abandoned cities.”

“Caucasians!” Sung-wu exclaimed, his face turning green. “But I haven’t been well; please, if somebody else could go —”

“You, perhaps, hold to the Broken Feather theory?” Chai raised an eyebrow. “An amazing philologist, Broken Feather; I took partial instruction from him. He held, you know, the Caucasian to be descended of Neanderthal stock. Their extreme size, thick body hair, their general brutish cast, reveal an innate inability to comprehend anything but a purely animalistic horizontal; proselytism is a waste of time.”

He affixed the younger man with a stern eye. “I wouldn’t send you, if I didn’t have unusual faith in your devotion.”

Sung-wu fingered his beads miserably. “Elron be praised,” he muttered; “you are too kind.”

Sung-wu slid into a lift and was raised, amid great groans and whirrings and false stops, to the top level of the Central Chamber building. He hurried down a corridor dimly lit by occasional yellow bulbs. A moment later he approached the doors of the scanning offices and flashed his identification at the robot guard. “Is Bard Fei-p’ang within?” he inquired.

“Verily,” the robot answered, stepping aside.

Sung-wu entered the offices, bypassed the rows of rusted, discarded machines, and entered the still-functioning wing. He located his brother-in-law, hunched over some graphs at one of the desks, laboriously copying material by hand. “Clearness be with you,” Sung-wu murmured.

Fei-p’ang glanced up in annoyance. “I told you not to come again; if the Arm finds out I’m letting you use the scanner for a personal plot, they’ll stretch me on the rack.”

“Gently,” Sung-wu murmured, his hand on his relation’s shoulder. “This is the last time. I’m going away; one more look, a final look.” His olive face

took on a pleading, piteous cast. “The turn comes for me very soon; this will be our last conversation.”

Sung-wu’s piteous look hardened into cunning. “You wouldn’t want it on your soul; no restitution will be possible at this late date.”

Fei-p’ang snorted. “All right; but for Elron’s sake, do it quickly.”

Sung-wu hurried to the mother-scanner and seated himself in the rickety basket. He snapped on the controls, clamped his forehead to the viewpiece, inserted his identity tab, and set the space-time finger into motion. Slowly, reluctantly, the ancient mechanism coughed into life and began tracing his personal tab along the future track.

Sung-wu’s hands shook; his body trembled; sweat dripped from his neck, as he saw himself scampering in miniature. *Poor Sung-wu*, he thought wretchedly. The mite of a thing hurried about its duties; this was but eight months hence. Harried and beset, it performed its tasks — and then, in a subsequent continuum, fell down and died.

Sung-wu removed his eyes from the viewpiece and waited for his pulse to slow. He could stand that part, watching the moment of death; it was what came next that was too jangling for him.

He breathed a silent prayer. Had he fasted enough? In the four-day purge and self-flagellation, he had used the whip with metal points, the heaviest possible. He had given away all his money; he had smashed a lovely vase his mother had left him, a treasured heirloom; he had rolled in the filth and mud in the center of town. Hundreds had seen him. Now, surely, all this was enough. But time was so short!

Faint courage stirring, he sat up and again put his eyes to the viewpiece. He was shaking with terror. What if it hadn’t changed? What if his mortification weren’t enough? He spun the controls, sending the finger tracing his time-track past the moment of death.

Sung-wu shrieked and scrambled back in horror. His future was the same, exactly the same; there had been no change at all. His guilt had been too great to be washed away in such short a time; it would take ages — and he didn't have ages.

He left the scanner and passed by his brother-in-law. "Thanks," he muttered shakily.

For once, a measure of compassion touched Fei-p'ang's efficient brown features. "Bad news? The next turn brings an unfortunate manifestation?"

"Bad scarcely describes it."

Fei-p'ang's pity turned to righteous rebuke. "Who do you have to blame but yourself?" he demanded sternly. "You know your conduct in this manifestation determines the next; if you look forward to a future life as a lower animal, it should make you glance over your behavior and repent your wrongs. The cosmic law that governs us is impartial. It is true justice: cause and effect; what you do determines what you next become — there can be no blame and no sorrow. There can be only understanding and repentence." His curiosity overcame him. "What is it? A snake? A squirrel?"

"It's no affair of yours," Sung-wu said, as he moved unhappily toward the exit doors.

"I'll look myself."

"Go ahead." Sung-wu pushed moodily out into the hall. He was dazed with despair: it hadn't changed; it was still the same.

In eight months he would die, stricken by one of the numerous plagues that swept over the inhabited parts of the world. He would become feverish, break out with red spots, turn and twist in an anguish of delirium. His bowels would drop out; his flesh would waste away; his eyes would roll up;

and after an interminable time of suffering, be would die. His body would lie in a mass heap, with hundreds of others — a whole streetful of dead, to be carted away by one of the robot sweepers, happily immune. His mortal remains would be burned in a common rubbish incinerator at the outskirts of the city.

Meanwhile, the eternal spark, Sung-wu's divine soul, would hurry from this space-time manifestation to the next in order. But it would not rise; it would sink; he had watched its descent on the scanner many times. There was always the same hideous picture — a sight beyond endurance — of his soul, as it plummeted down like a stone, into one of the lowest continua, a sinkhole of a manifestation at the very bottom of the ladder.

He had sinned. In his youth, Sung-wu had got mixed up with a black-eyed wench with long flowing hair, a glittering waterfall down her back and shoulders. Inviting red lips, plump breasts, hips that undulated and beckoned unmistakably. She was the wife of a friend, from the Warrior class, but he had taken her as his mistress; he had been certain time remained to rectify his venality.

But he was wrong: the wheel was soon to turn for him. The plague — not enough time to fast and pray and do good works. He was determined to go down, straight down to a wallowing, foul-aired planet in a stinking red-sun system, an ancient pit of filth and decay and unending slime — a jungle world of the lowest type.

In it, he would be a shiny-winged fly, a great blue-bottomed, buzzing carrion-eater that hummed and guzzled and crawled through the rotting carcasses of great lizards, slain in combat.

From this swamp, this pest-ridden planet in a diseased, contaminated system, he would have to rise painfully up the endless rungs of the cosmic ladder he had already climbed. It had taken eons to climb this far, to the level of a human being on the planet Earth, in the bright yellow Sol system; now he would have to do it all over again.

Chai beamed, “Elron be with you,” as the corroded observation ship was checked by the robot crew, and finally okayed for limited flight. Sung-wu slowly entered the ship and seated himself at what remained of the controls. He waved listlessly, then slammed the lock and bolted it by hand.

As the ship limped into the late afternoon sky, he reluctantly consulted the reports and records Chai had transferred to him.

The Tinkerists were a small cult; they claimed only a few hundred members, all drawn from the Techno class, which was the most despised of the social castes. The Bards, of course, were at the top; they were the teachers of society, the holy men who guided man to clearness. Then the Poets; they turned into saga the great legends of Elron Hu, who lived (according to legend) in the hideous days of the Time of Madness. Below the Poets were the Artists; then the Musicians; then the Workers, who supervised the robot crews. After them the Businessmen, the Warriors, the Farmers, and finally, at the bottom, the Technos.

Most of the Technos were Caucasians — immense white-skinned things, incredibly hairy, like apes; their resemblance to the great apes was striking. Perhaps Broken Feather was right; perhaps they did have Neanderthal blood and were outside the possibility of clearness. Sung-wu had always considered himself an anti-racist; he disliked those who maintained the Caucasians were a race apart. Extremists believed eternal damage would result to the species if the Caucasians were allowed to intermarry. In any case, the problem was academic; no decent, self-respecting woman of the higher classes — of Indian or Mongolian, or Bantu stock — would allow herself to be approached by a *Cauc*.

Below his ship, the barren countryside spread out, ugly and bleak. Great red spots that hadn’t yet been overgrown, and slag surfaces were still visible — but by this time most ruins were covered by soil and crabgrass. He could see men and robots fanning; villages, countless tiny brown circles in the green fields; occasional ruins of ancient cities — gaping sores like blind mouths, eternally open to the sky. They would never close, not now.

Ahead was the Detroit area, named, so it ran, for some now-forgotten spiritual leader. There were more villages, here. Off to his left, the leaden surface of a body of water, a lake of some kind. Beyond that — only Elron knew. No one went that far; there was no human life there, only wild animals and deformed things spawned from radiation infestation still lying heavy in the north.

He dropped his ship down. An open field lay to his right; a robot farmer was plowing with a metal hook welded to its waist, a section torn off some discarded machine. It stopped dragging the hook and gazed up in amazement, as Sung-wu landed the ship awkwardly and bumped to a halt.

“Clearness be with you,” the robot rasped obediently, as Sung-wu climbed out.

Sung-wu gathered up his bundle of reports and papers and stuffed them in a briefcase. He snapped the ship’s lock and hurried off toward the ruins of the city. The robot went back to dragging the rusty metal hook through the hard ground, its pitted body bent double with the strain, working slowly, silently, uncomplaining.

The little boy piped, “Whither, Bard?” as Sung-wu pushed wearily through the tangled debris and slag. He was a little black-faced Bantu, in red rags sewed and patched together. He ran alongside Sung-wu like a puppy, leaping and bounding and grinning white-teethed.

Sung-wu became immediately crafty; his intrigue with the black-haired girl had taught him elemental dodges and evasions. “My ship broke down,” he answered cautiously; it was certainly common enough. “It was the last ship still in operation at our field.”

The boy skipped and laughed and broke off bits of green weeds that grew along the trail. “I know somebody who can fix it,” he cried carelessly.

Sung-wu's pulse-rate changed. "Oh?" he murmured, as if uninterested. "There are those around here who practice the questionable art of repairing."

The boy nodded solemnly.

"Technos?" Sung-wu pursued. "Are there many of them here, around these old ruins?"

More black-faced boys, and some little dark-eyed Bantu girls, came scampering through the slag and ruins. "What's the matter with your ship?" one hollered at Sung-wu. "Won't it run?"

They all ran and shouted around him, as he advanced slowly — an unusually wild bunch, completely undisciplined. They rolled and fought and tumbled and chased each other around madly.

"How many of you," Sung-wu demanded, "have taken your first instruction?"

There was a sudden uneasy silence. The children looked at each other guiltily; none of them answered.

"Good Elron!" Sung-wu exclaimed in horror. "Are you all untaught?"

Heads hung guiltily.

"How do you expect to phase yourselves with the cosmic will? How can you expect to know the divine plan? This is really too much!"

He pointed a plump finger at one of the boys. "Are you constantly preparing yourself for the life to come? Are you constantly purging and purifying yourself? Do you deny yourself meat, sex, entertainment, financial gain, education, leisure?"

But it was obvious; their unrestrained laughter and play proved they were still jangled, far from clear — And clearness is the only road by which a person can gain understanding of the eternal plan, the cosmic wheel which turns endlessly, for all living things.

"Butterflies!" Sung-wu snorted with disgust. "You are no better than the beasts and birds of the field, who take no heed of the morrow. You play and game for today, thinking tomorrow won't come. Like insects —"

But the thought of insects reminded him of the shiny-winged blue-rumped fly, creeping over a rotting lizard carcass, and Sung-wu's stomach did a flip-flop; he forced it back in place and strode on, toward the line of villages emerging ahead.

Farmers were working the barren fields on all sides. A thin layer of soil over slag; a few limp wheat stalks waved, thin and emaciated. The ground was terrible, the worst he had seen. He could feel the metal under his feet; it was almost to the surface. Bent men and women watered their sickly crops with tin cans, old metal containers picked from the ruins. An ox was pulling a crude cart.

In another field, women were weeding by hand; all moved slowly, stupidly, victims of hookworm, from the soil. They were all barefoot. The children hadn't picked it up yet, but they soon would.

Sung-wu gazed up at the sky and gave thanks to Elron; here, suffering was unusually severe; trials of exceptional vividness lay on every hand. These men and women were being tempered in a hot crucible; their souls were probably purified to an astonishing degree. A baby lay in the shade, beside a half-dozing mother. Flies crawled over its eyes; its mother breathed heavily, hoarsely, her mouth open. An unhealthy flush discolored her brown cheeks. Her belly bulged; she was already pregnant again. Another eternal soul to be raised from a lower level. Her great breasts sagged and wobbled as she stirred in her sleep, spilling out over her dirty wraparound.

“Come here,” Sung-wu called sharply to the gang of black-faced children who followed along after him. “I’m going to talk to you.”

The children approached, eyes on the ground, and assembled in a silent circle around him. Sung-wu sat down, placed his briefcase beside him and folded his legs expertly under him in the traditional posture outlined by Elron in his seventh book of teaching.

“I will ask and you will answer,” Sung-wu stated. “You know the basic catechisms?” He peered sharply around. “Who knows the basic catechisms?”

One or two hands went up. Most of the children looked away unhappily.

“First!” snapped Sung-wu. “*Who are you?* You are a minute fragment of the cosmic plan.

“Second! *What are you?* A mere speck in a system so vast as to be beyond comprehension.

“Third! *What is the way of life?* To fulfill what is required by the cosmic forces

“Fourth! *Where are you?* On one step of the cosmic ladder.

“Fifth! *Where have you been?* Through endless steps; each turn of the wheel advances or depresses you.

“Sixth! *What determines your direction at the next turn?* Your conduct in this manifestation.

“Seventh! *What is right conduct?* Submitting yourself to the eternal forces, the cosmic elements that make up the divine plan.

“Eighth! *What is the significance of suffering?* To purify the soul.

“Ninth! *What is the significance of death?* To release the person from this manifestation, so he may rise to a new rung of the ladder.

“Tenth —”

But at that moment Sung-wu broke off. Two quasi-human shapes were approaching him. Immense white-skinned figures striding across the baked fields, between the sickly rows of wheat.

Technos — coming to meet him; his flesh crawled. Caucs. Their skins glittered pale and unhealthy, like nocturnal insects, dug from under rocks.

He rose to his feet, conquered his disgust, and prepared to greet them.

Sung-wu said, “Clearness!” He could smell them, a musky sheep smell, as they came to a halt in front of him. Two bucks, two immense sweating males, skin damp and sticky, with beards, and long disorderly hair. They wore sailcloth trousers and boots. With horror Sung-wu perceived a thick body-hair, on their chests, like woven mats — tufts in their armpits, on their arms, wrists, even the backs of their hands. Maybe Broken Feather was right; perhaps, in these great lumbering blond-haired beasts, the archaic Neanderthal stock — the false men — still survived. He could almost see the ape, peering from behind their blue eyes.

“Hi,” the first Cauc said. After a moment he added reflectively, “My name’s Jamison.”

“Pete Ferris,” the other grunted. Neither of them observed the customary deferences; Sung-wu winced but managed not to show it. Was it deliberate, a veiled insult, or perhaps mere ignorance? This was hard to tell; in lower classes there was, as Chai said, an ugly undercurrent of resentment and envy, and hostility.

“I’m making a routine survey,” Sung-wu explained, “on birth and death rates in rural areas. I’ll be here a few days. Is there some place I can stay?

Some public inn or hostel?”

The two Cauc bucks were silent. “Why?” one of them demanded bluntly.

Sung-wu blinked. “Why? Why what?”

“Why are you making a survey? If you want any information we’ll supply it.”

Sung-wu was incredulous. “Do you know to whom you’re talking? I’m a Bard! Why, you’re ten classes down; how dare you —” He choked with rage. In these rural areas the Technos had utterly forgotten their place. What was ailing the local Bards? Were they letting the system break apart?

He shuddered violently at the thought of what it would mean if Technos and Farmers and Businessmen were allowed to intermingle — even intermarry, and eat, and drink, in the same places. The whole structure of society would collpase. If all were to ride the same carts, use the same outhouses; it passed belief. A sudden nightmare picture loomed up before Sung-wu, of Technos living and mating with women of the Bard and Poet classes. He visioned a horizontally-oriented society, all persons on the same level, with horror. It went against the very grain of the cosmos, against the divine plan; it was the Time of Madness all over again. He shuddered.

“Where is the Manager of this area?” he demanded. ‘Take me to him; I’ll deal directly with him.”

The two Caucs turned and headed back the way they had come, without a word. After a moment of fury, Sung-wu followed behind them.

They led him through withered fields and over barren, eroded hills on which nothing grew; the ruins increased. At the edge of the city, a line of meager villages had been set up; he saw leaning, rickety wood huts, and

mud streets. From the villages a thick stench rose, the smell of offal and death.

Dogs lay sleeping under the huts; children poked and played in the filth and rotting debris. A few old people sat on porches, vacant-faced, eyes glazed and dull. Chickens pecked around, and he saw pigs and skinny cats — and the eternal rusting piles of metal, sometimes thirty feet high. Great towers of red slag were heaped up everywhere.

Beyond the villages were the ruins proper — endless miles of abandoned wreckage; skeletons of buildings; concrete walls; bathtubs and pipe; overturned wrecks that had been cars. All these were from the Time of Madness, the decade that had finally rung the curtain down on the sorriest interval in man's history. The five centuries of madness and jangledness were now known as the Age of Heresy, when man had gone against the divine plan and taken his destiny in his own hands.

They came to a larger hut, a two-story wood structure. The Caucs climbed a decaying flight of steps; boards creaked and gave ominously under their heavy boots. Sung-wu followed them nervously; they came out on a porch, a kind of open balcony.

On the balcony sat a man, an obese copper-skinned official in unbuttoned breeches, his shiny black hair pulled back and tied with a bone against his bulging red neck. His nose was large and prominent, his face, flat and wide, with many chins. He was drinking lime juice from a tin cup and gazing down at the mud street below. As the two Caucs appeared he rose slightly, a prodigious effort.

"This man," the Cauc named Jamison said, indicating Sung-wu, "wants to see you."

Sung-wu pushed angrily forward. "I am a Bard, from the Central Chamber; do you people recognize *this?"* He tore open his robe and flashed the symbol of the Holy Arm, gold worked to form a swath of flaming red.

“I insist you accord me proper treatment! I’m not here to be pushed around by any —”

He had said too much; Sung-wu forced his anger down and gripped his briefcase. The fat Indian was studying him calmly; the two Caucs had wandered to the far end of the balcony and were squatting down in the shade. They lit crude cigarettes and turned their backs.

“Do you permit this?” Sung-wu demanded, incredulous. “This — mingling?”

The Indian shrugged and sagged down even more in his chair. “Clearness be with you,” he murmured; “will you join me?” His calm expression remained unchanged; he seemed not to have noticed. “Some lime juice? Or perhaps coffee? Lime juice is good for these.” He tapped his mouth; his soft gums were lined with caked sores.

“Nothing for me,” Sung-wu muttered grumpily, as he took a seat opposite the Indian; “I’m here on an official survey.”

The Indian nodded faintly. “Oh?”

“Birth and death rates.” Sung-wu hesitated, then leaned toward the Indian. “I insist you send those two Caucs away; what I have to say to you is private.”

The Indian showed no change of expression; his broad face was utterly impassive. After a time he turned slightly. “Please go down to the street level,” he ordered. “As you will.”

The two Caucs got to their feet, grumbling, and pushed past the table, scowling and darting resentful glances at Sung-wu. One of them hawked and elaborately spat over the railing, an obvious insult.

“Insolence!” Sung-wu choked. “How can you allow it? Did you see them? By Elron, it’s beyond belief!”

The Indian shrugged indifferently — and belched. “All men are brothers on the wheel. Didn’t Elron Himself teach that, when He was on Earth?”

“Of course. But —”

“Are not even these men our brothers?”

“Naturally,” Sung-wu answered haughtily, “but they must know their place; they’re an insignificant class. In the rare event some object wants fixing, they called; but in the last year I do not recall a single incident when it was deemed advisible to repair anything. The need of such a class diminishes yearly; eventually such a class and the elements composing it —”

“You perhaps advocate sterilization?” the Indian inquired, heavy-lidded and sly.

“I advocate something. The lower classes reproduce like rabbits; spawning all the time — much faster than we Bards. I always see some swollen-up Cauc woman, but hardly a single Bard is born these days; the lower classes must fornicate constantly.”

“That’s about all that’s left them,” the Indian murmured mildly. He sipped a little lime juice. “You should try to be more tolerant.”

“Tolerant? I have nothing against them, as long as they —”

“It is said,” the Indian continued softly, “that Elron Hu, Himself, was a Cauc.”

Sung-wu spluttered indignantly and started to rejoin, but the hot words stuck fast in his mouth; down the mud street something was coming.

Sung-wu demanded, “What is it?” He leaped up excitedly and hurried to the railing.

A slow procession was advancing with solemn step. As if at a signal, men and women poured from their rickety huts and excitedly lined the street to watch. Sung-wu was transfixed, as the procession neared; his senses reeled. More and more men and women were collecting each moment; there seemed to be hundreds of them. They were a dense, murmuring mob, packed tight, swaying back and forth, faces avid. An hysterical moan passed through them, a great wind that stirred them like leaves of a tree. They were a single collective whole, a vast primitive organism, held ecstatic and hypnotized by the approaching column.

The marchers wore a strange costume: white shirts, with the sleeves roiled up; dark gray trousers of an incredibly archaic design, and black shoes. All were dressed exactly alike. They formed a dazzling double line of white shirts, gray trousers, marching calmly and solemnly, faces up, nostrils flared, jaws stern. A glazed fanaticism stamped each man and woman, such a ruthless expression that Sung-wu shrank back in terror. On and on they came, figures of grim stone in their primordial white shirts and gray trousers, a frightening breath from the past. Their heels struck the ground in a dull, harsh beat that reverberated among the rickety huts. The dogs woke; the children began to wail. The chickens flew squawking.

“Elron!” Sung-wu cried. “What’s happening?”

The marchers carried strange symbolic implements, ritualistic images with esoteric meaning that of necessity escaped Sung-wu. There were tubes and poles, and shiny webs of what looked like metal. *Metal!* But it was not rusty; it was shiny and bright. He was stunned; they looked — new.

The procession passed directly below. After the marchers came a huge rumbling cart. On it was mounted an obvious fertility symbol, a corkscrew-bore as long as a tree; it jutted from a square cube of gleaming steel; as the cart moved forward the bore lifted and fell.

After the cart came more marchers, also grim-faced, eyes glassy, loaded down with pipes and tubes and armfuls of glittering equipment. They passed on, and then the street was filled by surging throngs of awed men and women, who followed after them, utterly dazed. And then came children and barking dogs.

The last marcher carried a pennant that fluttered above her as she strode along, a tall pole, hugged tight to her chest. At the top, the bright pennant fluttered boldly. Sung-wu made its marking out, and for a moment consciousness left him. There it was, directly below; it had passed under his very nose, out in the open for all to see — unconcealed. The pennant had a great T emblazoned on it.

“They —” he began, but the obese Indian cut him off.

“The Tinkerists,” he rumbled, and sipped his lime juice.

Sung-wu grabbed up his briefcase and scrambled toward the stairs. At the bottom, the two hulking Caucs were already moving into motion. The Indian signaled quickly to them. “Here!” They started grimly up, little blue eyes mean, red-rimmed and cold as stone; under their pelts their bulging muscles rippled.

Sung-wu fumbled in his cloak. His shiver-gun came out; he squeezed the release and directed it toward the two Caucs. But nothing happened; the gun had stopped functioning. He shook it wildly; flakes of rust and dried insulation fluttered from it. It was useless, worn out; he tossed it away and then, with the resolve of desperation, jumped through the railing.

He, and a torrent of rotten wood, cascaded to the street. He hit, rolled, struck his head against the corner of a hut, and shakily pulled himself to his feet.

He ran. Behind him, the two Caucs pushed after him through the throngs of men and women milling aimlessly along. Occasionally he glimpsed their white, perspiring faces. He turned a corner, raced between shabby huts, leaped over a sewage ditch, climbed heaps of sagging debris, slipping and rolled and at last lay gasping behind a tree, his briefcase still clutched.

The Caucs were nowhere in sight. He had evaded them; for the moment, he was safe.

He peered around. Which way was his ship? He shielded his eyes against the late-afternoon sun until he managed to make out its bent, tubular outline. It was far off to his right, barely visible in the dying glare that hung gloomily across the sky. Sung-wu got unsteadily to his feet and began walking cautiously in that direction.

He was in a terrible spot; the whole region was pro-Tinkerist — even the Chamber-appointed Manager. And it wasn't along class lines; the cult had knifed to the top level. And it wasn't just Caucs, anymore; he couldn't count on Bantu or Mongolian or Indian, not in this area. An entire countryside was hostile, and lying in wait for him.

Elron, it was worse than the Arm had thought! No wonder they wanted a report. A whole area had swung over to a fanatic cult, a violent extremist group of heretics, teaching a most diabolical doctrine. He shuddered — and kept on, avoiding contact with the farmers in their fields, both human and robot. He increased his pace, as alarm and horror pushed him suddenly faster.

If the thing were to spread, if it were to hit a sizable portion of mankind, it might bring back the Time of Madness.

The ship was taken. Three or four immense Caucs stood lounging around it, cigarettes dangling from their slack mouths, white-faced and hairy. Stunned, Sung-wu moved back down the hillside, prickles of despair

numbing him. The ship was lost; they had got there ahead of him. What was he supposed to do now?

It was almost evening. He'd have to walk fifty miles through the darkness, over unfamiliar, hostile ground, to reach the next inhabited area. The sun was already beginning to set, the air turning cool; and in addition, he was sopping wet with filth and slimy water. He had slipped in the gloom and fallen in a sewage ditch.

He retraced his steps, mind blank. What could he do? He was helpless; his shiver-gun had been useless. He was alone, and there was no contact with the Arm. Tinkerists swarming on all sides; they'd probably gut him and sprinkle his blood over the crops — or worse.

He skirted a farm. In the fading twilight, a dim figure was working, a young woman. He eyed her cautiously, as he passed; she had her back to him. She was bending over, between rows of corn. What was she doing? Was she — good Elron!

He stumbled blindly across the field toward her, caution forgotten. "Young woman! *Stop!* In the name of Elron, stop at once!"

The girl straightened up. "Who are you?"

Breathless, Sung-wu arrived in front of her, gripping his battered briefcase and gasping. "Those are our *brothers!* How can you destroy them? They may be close relatives, recently deceased." He struck out and knocked the jar from her hand; it hit the ground and the imprisoned beetles scurried off in all directions.

The girl's cheeks flushed with anger. "It took me an hour to collect those!"

"You were killing them! Crushing them!" He was speechless with horror. "I saw you!"

“Of course.” The girl raised her black eyebrows. “They gnaw the corn.”

“They’re our brothers!” Sung-wu repeated wildly. “Of course they gnaw the corn; because of certain sins committed, the cosmic forces have —” He broke off, appalled. “Don’t you know? You’ve never been told?”

The girl was perhaps sixteen. In the fading light she was a small, slender figure, the empty jar in one hand, a rock in the other. A tide of black hair tumbled down her neck. Her eyes were large and luminous; her lips full and deep red; her skin a smooth copper-brown — Polynesian, probably. He caught a glimpse of firm brown breasts as she bent to grab a beetle that had landed on its back. The sight made his pulse race; in a flash he was back three years.

“What’s your name?” he asked, more kindly.

“Frija.”

“How old are you?”

“Seventeen.”

“I am a Bard; have you ever spoken to a Bard before?”

“No,” the girl murmured. “I don’t think so.”

She was almost invisible in the darkness. Sung-wu could scarcely see her, but what he saw sent his heart into an agony of paroxysms; the same cloud of black hair, the same deep red lips. This girl was younger, of course — a mere child, and from the Farmer class, at that. But she had Liu’s figure, and in time she’d ripen — probably in a matter of months.

Ageless, honeyed craft worked his vocal cords. “I have landed in this area to make a survey. Something has gone wrong with my ship and I must remain the night. I know no one here, however. My plight is such that —”

“Oh,” Frija said, immediately sympathetic. “Why don’t you stay with us, tonight? We have an extra room, now that my brother’s away.”

“Delighted,” Sung-wu answered instantly. “Will you lead the way? I’ll gladly repay you for your kindness.” The girl moved off toward a vague shape looming up in the darkness. Sung-wu hurried quickly after her. “I find it incredible you haven’t been instructed. This whole area has deteriorated beyond belief. What ways have you fallen in? We’ll have to spend much time together; I can see that already. Not one of you even approaches clearness — you’re jangled, every one of you.”

“What does that mean?” Frija asked, as she stepped up on the porch and opened the door.

“Jangled?” Sung-wu bunked in amazement. “We *will* have to study much together.” In his eagerness, he tripped on the top step, and barely managed to catch himself. “Perhaps you need complete instruction; it may be necessary to start from the very bottom. I can arrange a stay at the Holy Arm for you — under my protection, of course. Jangled means out of harmony with the cosmic elements. How can you live this way? My dear, you’ll have to be brought back in line with the divine plan!”

“What plan is that?” She led him into a warm living room; a crackling fire burned in the grate. Two or three men sat around a rough wood table, an old man with long white hair and two younger men. A frail, withered old woman sat dozing in a rocker in the corner. In the kitchen, a buxom young woman was fixing the evening meal.

“Why, *the* plan!” Sung-wu answered, astounded. His eyes darted around. Suddenly his briefcase fell to the floor. “Caucs,” he said.

They were all Caucasians, even Frija. She was deeply tanned; her skin was almost black; but she was a Cauc, nonetheless. He recalled: Caucs, in the sun, turned dark, sometimes even darker than Mongolians. The girl had

tossed her work robe over a door hook; in her household shorts her thighs were as white as milk. And the old man and woman —

“This is my grandfather,” Frija said, indicating the old man. “Benjamin Tinker.”

Under the watchful eyes of the two younger Tinkers, Sung-wu was washed and scrubbed, given clean clothes, and then fed. He ate only a little; he didn’t feel very well.

“I can’t understand it,” he muttered, as he listlessly pushed his plate away. “The scanner at the Central Chamber said I had eight months left. The plague will —” He considered. “But it can always change. The scanner goes on prediction, not certainty; multiple possibilities; free will… Any overt act of sufficient significance —”

Ben Tinker laughed. “You want to stay alive?”

“Of course!” Sung-wu muttered indignantly.

They all laughed — even Frija, and the old woman in her shawl, snow-white hair and mild blue eyes. They were the first Cauc women he had ever seen. They weren’t big and lumbering like the male Caucs; they didn’t seem to have the same bestial characteristics. The two young Cauc bucks looked plenty tough, though; they and their father were poring over an elaborate series of papers and reports, spread out on the dinner table, among the empty plates.

“This area,” Ben Tinker murmured. “Pipes should go here. And here. Water’s the main need. Before the next crop goes in, we’ll dump a few hundred pounds of artificial fertilizers and plow it in. The power plows should be ready, then.”

“After that?” one of the tow-headed sons asked.

“Then spraying. If we don’t have the nicotine sprays, we’ll have to try the copper dusting again. I prefer the spray, but we’re still behind on production. The bore has dug us up some good storage caverns, though. It ought to start picking up.”

“And here,” a son said, “there’s going to be need of draining. A lot of mosquito breeding going on. We can try the oil, as we did over here. But I suggest the whole thing be filled in. We can use the dredge and scoop, if they’re not tied up.”

Sung-wu had taken this all in. Now he rose unsteadily to his feet, trembling with wrath. He pointed a shaking finger at the elder Tinker.

“You’re — meddling!” he gasped.

They looked up. “Meddling?”

“With the plan! With the cosmic plan! Good Elron — you’re interfering with the divine processes. Why —” He was staggered by a realization so alien it convulsed the very core of his being. “You’re actually going to set back turns of the wheel.”

“That,” said old Ben Tinker, “is right.”

Sung-wu sat down again, stunned. His mind refused to take it all in. “I don’t understand; what’ll happen? If you slow the wheel, if you disrupt the divine plan —”

“He’s going to be a problem,” Ben Tinker murmured thoughtfully. “If we kill him, the Arm will merely send another; they have hundreds like him. And if we don’t kill him, if we send him back, he’ll raise a hue and cry that’ll bring the whole Chamber down here. It’s too soon for this to happen. We’re gaining support fast, but we need another few months.”

Sweat stood out on Sung-wu's plump forehead. He wiped it away shakily. "If you kill me," he muttered, "you will sink down many rungs of the cosmic ladder. You have risen this far; why undo the work accomplished in endless ages past?"

Ben Tinker fixed one powerful blue eye on him. "My friend," he said slowly, "isn't it true one's next manifestation is determined by one's moral conduct in this?"

Sung-wu nodded. "Such is well known."

"And what is right conduct?"

"Fulfilling the divine plan," Sung-wu responded immediately.

"Maybe our whole Movement is part of the plan," Ben Tinker said thoughtfully. "Maybe the cosmic forces want us to drain the swamps and kill the grasshoppers and inoculate the children; after all, the cosmic forces put us all here."

"If you kill me," Sung-wu wailed, "I'll be a carrion-eating fly. I *saw* it, a shiny-winged blue-rumped fly crawling over the carcass of a dead lizard — In a rotting, steaming jungle in a filthy cesspool of a planet." Tears came; he dabbed at them futilely. "In an out-of-the-way system, at the bottom of the ladder!"

Tinker was amused. "Why this?"

"I've sinned." Sung-wu sniffed and flushed. "I committed adultery."

"Can't you purge yourself?"

"There's no time!" His misery rose to wild despair. "My mind is *still* impure!" He indicated Frija, standing in the bedroom doorway, a supple white and tan shape in her household shorts. "I continue to think carnal

thoughts; I can’t rid myself. In eight months the plague will turn the wheel on me — and it’ll be done! If I lived to be an old man, withered and toothless — no more appetite —” His plump body quivered in a frenzied convulsion. “There’s no *time* to purge and atone. According to the scanner, I’m going to die a young man!”

After this torrent of words, Tinker was silent, deep in thought. “The plague,” he said, at last. “What, exactly, are the symptoms?”

Sung-wu described them, his olive face turning to a sickly green. When he had finished, the three men looked significantly at each other.

Ben Tinker got to his feet. “Come along,” he commanded briskly, taking the Bard by the arm. “I have something to show you. It is left from the old days. Sooner or later we’ll advance enough to turn out our own, but right now we have only these remaining few. We have to keep them guarded and sealed.”

“This is for a good cause,” one of the sons said. “It’s worth it.” He caught his brother’s eye and grinned.

Bard Chai finished reading Sung-wu’s blue-slip report; he tossed it suspiciously down and eyed the younger Bard.

“You’re sure? There’s no further need of investigation?”

“The cult will wither away,” Sung-wu murmured indifferently. “It lacks any real support; it’s merely an escape valve, without intrinsic validity.”

Chai wasn’t convinced. He reread parts of the report again. “I suppose you’re right; but we’ve heard so many —”

“Lies,” Sung-wu said vaguely. “Rumors. Gossip. May I go?” He moved toward the door.

“Eager for your vacation?” Chai smiled understandingly. “I know how you feel. This report must have exhausted you. Rural areas, stagnant backwaters. We must prepare a better program of rural education. I’m convinced whole regions are in a jangled state. We’ve got to bring clearness to these people. It’s our historic role; our class function.”

“Verily,” Sung-wu murmured, as he bowed his way out of the office and down the hall.

As he walked he fingered his beads thankfully. He breathed a silent prayer as his fingers moved over the surface of the little red pellets, shiny spheres that glowed freshly in place of the faded old — the gift of the Tinkerists. The beads would come in handy; he kept his hand on them tightly. Nothing must happen to them, in the next eight months. He had to watch them carefully, while he poked around the ruined cities of Spain — and finally came down with the plague.

He was the first Bard to wear a rosary of penicillin capsules.

The Last of the Masters

Consciousness collected around him. He returned with reluctance; the weight of centuries, an unbearable fatigue, lay over him. The ascent was painful. He would have shrieked if there were anything to shriek with. And anyhow, he was beginning to feel glad.

Eight thousand times he had crept back thus, with ever-increasing difficulty. Someday he wouldn't make it. Someday the black pool would remain. But not this day. He was still alive; above the aching pain and reluctance came joyful triumph.

"Good morning," a bright voice said. "Isn't it a nice day? I'll pull the curtains and you can look out."

He could see and hear. But he couldn't move. He lay quietly and allowed the various sensations of the room to pour in on him. Carpets, wallpaper, tables, lamps, pictures. Desk and vidscreen. Gleaming yellow sunlight streamed through the window. Blue sky. Distant hills. Fields, buildings, roads, factories. Workers and machines.

Peter Green was busily straightening things, his young face wreathed with smiles. "Lots to do today. Lots of people to see you. Bills to sign. Decisions to make. This is Saturday. There will be people coming in from the remote sectors. I hope the maintenance crew has done a good job." He added quickly, "They have, of course. I talked to Fowler on my way over here. Everything's fixed up fine."

The youth's pleasant tenor mixed with the bright sunlight. Sounds and sights, but nothing else. He could feel nothing. He tried to move his arm but nothing happened.

"Don't worry," Green said, catching his terror. "They'll soon be along with the rest. You'll be all right. You *have* to be. How could we survive

without you?”

He relaxed. God knew, it had happened often enough before. Anger surged dully. Why couldn’t they coordinate? Get it up all at once, not piecemeal. He’d have to change their schedule. Make them organize better.

Past the bright window a squat metal car chugged to a halt. Uniformed men piled out, gathered up heavy armloads of equipment, and hurried toward the main entrance of the building.

“Here they come,” Green exclaimed with relief. “A little late, eh?”

“Another traffic tie-up,” Fowler snorted, as he entered. “Something wrong with the signal system again. Outside flow got mixed up with the urban stuff; tied up on all sides. I wish you’d change the law.”

Now there was motion all around him. The shapes of Fowler and McLean loomed, two giant moons abruptly ascendant. Professional faces that peered down at him anxiously. He was turned over on his side. Muffled conferences. Urgent whispers. The clank of tools.

“Here,” Fowler muttered. “Now here. No, that’s later. Be careful. Now run it up through here.”

The work continued in taut silence. He was aware of their closeness. Dim outlines occasionally cut off his light. He was turned this way and that, thrown around like a sack of meal.

“Okay,” Fowler said. “Tape it.”

A long silence. He gazed dully at the wall, at the slightly-faded blue and pink wallpaper. An old design that showed a woman in hoopskirts, with a little parasol over her dainty shoulder. A frilly white blouse, tiny tips of shoes. An astoundingly clean puppy at her side.

Then he was turned back, to face upward. Five shapes groaned and strained over him. Their fingers flew, their muscles rippled under their shirts. At last they straightened up and retreated. Fowler wiped sweat from his face; they were all tense and bleary eyed.

"Go ahead," Fowler rasped. "Throw it."

Shock hit him. He gasped. His body arched, then settled slowly down.

His body. He could feel. He moved his arms experimentally. He touched his face, his shoulder, the wall. The wall was real and hard. All at once the world had become three-dimensional again.

Relief showed on Fowler's face. "Thank God." He sagged wearily. "How do you feel?"

After a moment he answered, "All right."

Fowler sent the rest of the crew out. Green began dusting again, off in the corner. Fowler sat down on the edge of the bed and lit his pipe. "Now listen to me," he said. "I've got bad news. I'll give it to you the way you always want it, straight from the shoulder."

"What is it?" he demanded. He examined his fingers. He already knew.

There were dark circles under Fowler's eyes. He hadn't shaved. His square-jawed face was drawn and unhealthy. "We were up all night. Working on your motor system. We've got it jury-rigged, but it won't hold. Not more than another few months. The thing's climbing. The basic units can't be replaced. When they wear out they're gone. We can weld in relays and wiring, but we can't fix the five synapsis-coils. There were only a few men who could make those, and they've been dead two centuries. If the coils burn out —"

“Is there any deterioration in the synapsis-coils?” he interrupted.

“Not yet. Just motor areas. Arms, in particular. What’s happening to your legs will happen to your arms and finally all your motor system. You’ll be paralyzed by the end of the year. You’ll be able to see, hear, and think. And broadcast. But that’s all.” He added, “Sorry, Bors. We’re doing all we can.”

“All right,” Bors said. “You’re excused. Thanks for telling me straight. I guessed.”

“Ready to go down? A lot of people with problems, today. They’re stuck until you get there.”

“Let’s go.” He focused his mind with an effort and turned his attention to the details of the day. “I want the heavy metals research program speeded. It’s lagging, as usual. I may have to pull a number of men from related work and shift them to the generators. The water level will be dropping soon. I want to start feeding power along the lines while there’s still power to feed. As soon as I turn my back everything starts falling apart.”

Fowler signalled Green and he came quickly over. The two of them bent over Bors and, grunting, hoisted him up and carried him to the door. Down the corridor and outside.

They deposited him in the squat metal car, the new little service truck. Its polished surface was a startling contrast to his pitted, corroded hull, bent and splotched and eaten away. A dull, patina-covered machine of archaic steel and plastic that hummed faintly, rustily, as the men leaped in the front seat and raced the car out onto the main highway.

Edward Tolby perspired, pushed his pack up higher, hunched over, tightened his gun belt, and cursed.

“Daddy,” Silvia reproved. “Cut that.”

Tolby spat furiously in the grass at the side of the road. He put his arm around his slim daughter. “Sorry, Silv. Nothing personal. The damn heat.”

Mid-morning sun shimmered down on the dusty road. Clouds of dust rose and billowed around the three as they pushed slowly along. They were dead tired. Tolby’s heavy face was flushed and sullen. An unlit cigarette dangled between his lips. His big, powerfully built body was hunched resentfully forward. His daughter’s canvas shirt clung moistly to her arms and breasts. Moons of sweat darkened her back. Under her jeans her thigh muscles rippled wearily.

Robert Penn walked a little behind the two Tolby’s, hands deep in his pockets, eyes on the road ahead. His mind was blank; he was half asleep from the double shot of hexobarb he had swallowed at the last League camp. And the heat lulled him. On each side of the road fields stretched out, pastures of grass and weeds, a few trees here and there. A tumbled-down farmhouse. The ancient rusting remains of a bomb shelter, two centuries old. Once, some dirty sheep.

“Sheep,” Penn said. “They eat the grass too far down. It won’t grow back.”

“Now he’s a farmer,” Tolby said to his daughter.

“Daddy,” Silvia snapped. “Stop being nasty.”

“It’s this heat. This damn heat.” Tolby cursed again, loudly and futilely. “It’s not worth it. For ten pinks I’d go back and tell them it was a lot of pig swill.”

“Maybe it is, at that,” Penn said mildly.

“All right, you go back,” Tolby grunted. “You go back and tell them it’s a lot of pig swill. They’ll pin a medal on you. Maybe raise you up a grade.”

Penn laughed. “Both of you shut up. There’s some kind of town ahead.”

Tolby’s massive body straightened eagerly. “Where?” He shielded his eyes. “By God, he’s right. A village. And it isn’t a mirage. You see it, don’t you?” His good humor returned and he rubbed his big hands together. “What say, Penn. A couple of beers, a few games of throw with some of the local peasants — maybe we can stay overnight.” He licked his thick lips with anticipation. “Some of those village wenches, the kind that hang around the grog shops —”

“I know the kind you mean,” Penn broke in. “The kind that are tired of doing nothing. Want to see the big commercial centers. Want to meet some guy that’ll buy them mecho-stuff and take them places.”

At the side of the road a farmer was watching them curiously. He had halted his horse and stood leaning on his crude plow, hat pushed back on his head.

“What’s the name of this town?” Tolby yelled.

The farmer was silent a moment. He was an old man, thin and weathered. “This town?” he repeated.

“Yeah, the one ahead.”

“That’s a nice town.” The farmer eyed the three of them. “You been through here before?”

“No, sir,” Tolby said. “Never.”

“Team break down?”

“No, we’re on foot.”

“How far you come?”

“About a hundred and fifty miles.”

The farmer considered the heavy packs strapped on their backs. Their cleated hiking shoes. Dusty clothing and weary, sweat-streaked faces. Jeans and canvas shirts. Ironite walking staffs. “That’s a long way,” he said. “How far you going?”

“As far as we feel like it,” Tolby answered. “Is there a place ahead we can stay? Hotel? Inn?”

“That town,” the farmer said, “is Fairfax. It has a lumber mill, one of the best in the world. A couple of pottery works. A place where you can get clothes put together by machines. Regular mecho-clothing. A gun shop where they pour the best shot this side of the Rockies. And a bakery. Also there’s an old doctor living there, and a lawyer. And some people with books to teach the kids. They came with t.b. They made a school house out of an old barn.”

“How large a town?” Penn asked.

“Lot of people. More born all the time. Old folks die. Kids die. We had a fever last year. About a hundred kids died. Doctor said it came from the water hole. We shut the water hole down. Kids died anyhow. Doctor said it was the milk. Drove off half the cows. Not mine. I stood out there with my gun and I shot the first of them came to drive off my cow. Kids stopped dying as soon as fall came. I think it was the heat.”

“Sure is hot,” Tolby agreed.

“Yes, it gets hot around here. Water’s pretty scarce.” A crafty look slid across his old face. “You folks want a drink? The young lady looks pretty tired. Got some bottles of water down under the house. In the mud. Nice and cold.” He hesitated. “Pink a glass.”

Tolby laughed. “No, thanks.”

“Two glasses a pink,” the farmer said.

“Not interested,” Penn said. He thumped his canteen and the three of them started on. “So long.”

The farmer’s face hardened. “Damn foreigners,” he muttered. He turned angrily back to his plowing.

The town baked in silence. Flies buzzed and settled on the backs of stupefied horses, tied up at posts. A few cars were parked here and there. People moved listlessly along the sidewalks. Elderly lean-bodied men dozed on porches. Dogs and chickens slept in the shade under houses. The houses were small, wooden, chipped and peeling boards, leaning and angular — and old. Warped and split by age and heat. Dust lay over everything. A thick blanket of dry dust over the cracking houses and the dull-faced men and animals.

Two lank men approached them from an open doorway. “Who are you? What do you want?”

They stopped and got out their identification. The men examined the sealed-plastic cards. Photographs, fingerprints, data. Finally they handed them back.

“AL,” one said. “You really from the Anarchist League?”

“That’s right,” Tolby said.

“Even the girl?” The men eyed Silvia with languid greed. “Tell you what. Let us have the girl a while and we’ll skip the head tax.”

“Don’t kid me,” Tolby grunted. “Since when does the League pay head tax or any other tax?” He pushed past them impatiently. “Where’s the grog shop? I’m dying!”

A two-story white building was on their left. Men lounged on the porch, watching them vacantly. Penn headed toward it and the Tolby’s followed. A faded, peeling sign lettered across the front read: *Beer, Wine on Tap.*

“This is it,” Penn said. He guided Silvia up the sagging steps, past the men, and inside. Tolby followed; he unstrapped his pack gratefully as he came.

The place was cool and dark. A few men and women were at the bar; the rest sat around tables. Some youths were playing throw in the back. A mechanical tune-maker wheezed and composed in the corner, a shabby, half-ruined machine only partially functioning. Behind the bar a primitive scene-shifter created and destroyed vague phantasmagoria: seascapes, mountain peaks, snowy valleys, great rolling hills, a nude woman that lingered and then dissolved into one vast breast. Dim, uncertain processions that no one noticed or looked at. The bar itself was an incredibly ancient sheet of transparent plastic, stained and chipped and yellow with age. Its n-grav coat had faded from one end; bricks now propped it up. The drink mixer had long since fallen apart. Only wine and beer were served. No living man knew how to mix the simplest drink.

Tolby moved up to the bar. “Beer,” he said. “Three beers.” Penn and Silvia sank down at a table and removed their packs, as the bartender served Tolby three mugs of thick, dark beer. He showed his card and carried the mugs over to the table.

The youths in the back had stopped playing. They were watching the three as they sipped their beer and unlaced their hiking boots. After a while one of them came slowly over.

“Say,” he said. “You’re from the League.”

“That’s right,” Tolby murmured sleepily.

Everyone in the place was watching and listening. The youth sat down across from the three; his companions flocked excitedly around and took seats on all sides. The juveniles of the town. Bored, restless, dissatisfied. Their eyes took in the ironite staffs, the guns, the heavy metal-cleated boots. A murmured whisper rustled through them. They were about eighteen. Tanned, rangy.

“How do you get in?” one demanded bluntly.

“The League?” Tolby leaned back in his chair, found a match, and lit his cigarette. He unfastened his belt, belched loudly, and settled back contentedly. “You get in by examination.”

“What do you have to know?”

Tolby shrugged. “About everything.” He belched again and scratched thoughtfully at his chest, between two buttons. He was conscious of the ring of people around on all sides. A little old man with a beard and horn-rimmed glasses. At another table, a great tub of a man in a red shirt and blue-striped trousers, with a bulging stomach.

Youths. Farmers. A Negro in a dirty white shirt and trousers, a book under his arm. A hard-jawed blonde, hair in a net, red nails and high heels, tight yellow dress. Sitting with a gray-haired businessman in a dark brown suit. A tall young man holding hands with a young black-haired girl, huge eyes, in a soft white blouse and skirt, little slippers kicked under the table. Under the table her bare, tanned feet twisted; her slim body was bent forward with interest.

“You have to know,” Tolby said, “how the League was formed. You have to know how we pulled down the governments that day. Pulled them down and destroyed them. Burned all the buildings. And all the records. Billions of microfilms and papers. Great bonfires that burned for weeks. And the swarms of little white things that poured out when we knocked the buildings over.”

“You killed them?” the great tub of a man asked, lips twitching avidly.

“We let them go. They were harmless. They ran and hid. Under rocks.” Tolby laughed. “Funny little scurrying things. Insects. Then we went in and gathered up all the records and equipment for making records. By God, we burned everything.”

“And the robots,” a youth said.

“Yeah, we smashed all the government robots. There weren’t many of them. They were used only at high levels. When a lot of facts had to be integrated.”

The youth’s eyes bulged. “You saw them? You were there when they smashed the robots?”

Penn laughed. “Tolby means the League. That was two hundred years ago.”

The youth grinned nervously. “Yeah. Tell us about the marches.”

Tolby drained his mug and pushed it away. “I’m out of beer.”

The mug was quickly refilled. He grunted his thanks and continued, voice deep and furry, dulled with fatigue. “The marches. That was really something, they say. All over the world, people getting up, throwing down what they were doing —”

“It started in East Germany,” the hard-jawed blonde said. “The riots.”

“Then it spread to Poland,” the Negro put in shyly. “My grandfather used to tell me how everybody sat and listened to the television. His grandfather used to tell him. It spread to Czechoslovakia and then Austria and Roumania and Bulgaria. Then France. And Italy.”

“France was first!” the little old man with beard and glasses cried violently. “They were without a government a whole month. The people saw they could live without a government!”

“The marches started it,” the black-haired girl corrected. “That was the first time they started pulling down the government buildings. In East Germany and Poland. Big mobs of unorganized workers.”

“Russia and America were the last,” Tolby said. “When the march on Washington came there was close to twenty million of us. We were big in those days! They couldn’t stop us when we finally moved.”

“They shot a lot,” the hard-faced blonde said.

“Sure. But the people kept coming. And yelling to the soldiers. ‘Hey, Bill! Don’t shoot!’ ‘Hey, Jack! It’s me, Joe.’ ‘Don’t shoot — we’re your friends!’ ‘Don’t kill us, join us!’ And by God, after a while they did. They couldn’t keep shooting their own people. They finally threw down their guns and got out of the way.”

“And then you found the place,” the little black-haired girl said breathlessly.

“Yeah. We found the place. *Six* places. Three in America. One in Britain. Two in Russia. It took us ten years to find the last place — and make sure it was the last place.”

“What then?” the youth asked, bug-eyed.

“Then we busted every one of them.” Tolby raised himself up, a massive man, beer mug clutched, heavy face flushed dark red. “Every damn A-bomb in the whole world.”

There was an uneasy silence.

“Yeah,” the youth murmured. “You sure took care of those war people.”

“Won’t be any more of them,” the great tub of a man said. “They’re gone for good.”

Tolby fingered his ironite staff. “Maybe so. And maybe not. There just might be a few of them left.”

“What do you mean?” the tub of a man demanded.

Tolby raised his hard gray eyes. “It’s time you people stopped kidding us. You know damn well what I mean. We’ve heard rumors. Someplace around this area there’s a bunch of them. Hiding out.”

Shocked disbelief, then anger hummed to a roar. “That’s a lie!” the tub of a man shouted.

“Is it?”

The little man with beard and glasses leaped up. “There’s nobody here has anything to do with governments! We’re all good people!”

“You better watch your step,” one of the youths said softly to Tolby. “People around here don’t like to be accused.”

Tolby got unsteadily to his feet, his ironite staff gripped. Penn got up beside him and they stood together. “If any of you knows something,” Tolby said, “you better tell it. Right now.”

“Nobody knows anything,” the hard-faced blonde said. “You’re talking to honest folks.”

“That’s so,” the Negro said, nodding his head. “Nobody here’s doing anything wrong.”

“You saved our lives,” the black-haired girl said. “If you hadn’t pulled down the governments we’d all be dead in the war. Why should we hold back something?”

“That’s true,” the great tub of a man grumbled. “We wouldn’t be alive if it wasn’t for the League. You think we’d do anything against the League?”

“Come on,” Silvia said to her father. “Let’s go.” She got to her feet and tossed Penn his pack.

Tolby grunted belligerently. Finally he took his own pack and hoisted it to his shoulder. The room was deathly silent. Everyone stood frozen, as the three gathered their things and moved toward the door.

The little dark-haired girl stopped them. “The next town is thirty miles from here,” she said.

“The road’s blocked,” her tall companion explained. “Slides closed it years ago.”

“Why don’t you stay with us tonight? There’s plenty of room at our place. You can rest up and get an early start tomorrow.”

“We don’t want to impose,” Silvia murmured.

Tolby and Penn glanced at each other, then at the girl. “If you’re sure you have plenty of room —”

The great tub of a man approached them. “Listen. I have ten yellow slips. I want to give them to the League. I sold my farm last year. I don’t need any more slips; I’m living with my brother and his family.” He pushed the slips at Tolby. “Here.”

Tolby pushed them back. “Keep them.”

“This way,” the tall young man said, as they clattered down the sagging steps, into a sudden blinding curtain of heat and dust. “We have a car. Over this way. An old gasoline car. My dad fixed it so it burns oil.”

“You should have taken the slips,” Penn said to Tolby, as they got into the ancient, battered car. Flies buzzed around them. They could hardly breathe; the car was a furnace. Silvia fanned herself with a rolled-up paper. The black-haired girl unbuttoned her blouse.

“What do we need money for?” Tolby laughed good-naturedly. “I haven’t paid for anything in my life. Neither have you.”

The car sputtered and moved slowly forward, onto the road. It began to gain speed. Its motor banged and roared. Soon it was moving surprisingly fast.

“You saw them,” Silvia said, over the racket. “They’d give us anything they had. We saved their lives.” She waved at the fields, the farmers and their crude teams, the withered crops, the sagging old farmhouses. “They’d all be dead, if it hadn’t been for the League.” She smashed a fly peevishly. “They depend on us.”

The black-haired girl turned toward them, as the car rushed along the decaying road. Sweat streaked her tanned skin. Her half-covered breasts trembled with the motion of the car. “I’m Laura Davis. Pete and I have an old farmhouse his dad gave us when we got married.”

“You can have the whole downstairs,” Pete said.

“There’s no electricity, but we’ve got a big fireplace. It gets cold at night. It’s hot in the day, but when the sun sets it gets terribly cold.”

“We’ll be all right,” Penn murmured. The vibration of the car made him a little sick.

“Yes,” the girl said, her black eyes flashing. Her crimson lips twisted. She leaned toward Penn intently, her small face strangely alight. “Yes, we’ll take good care of you.”

At that moment the car left the road.

Silvia shrieked. Tolby threw himself down, head between his knees, doubled up in a ball. A sudden curtain of green burst around Penn. Then a sickening emptiness, as the car plunged down. It struck with a roaring crash that blotted out everything. A single titanic cataclysm of fury that picked Penn up and flung his remains in every direction.

“Put me down,” Bors ordered. “On this railing for a moment before I go inside.”

The crew lowered him onto the concrete surface and fastened magnetic grapples into place. Men and women hurried up the wide steps, in and out of the massive building that was Bors’ main offices.

The sight from these steps pleased him. He liked to stop here and look around at his world. At the civilization he had carefully constructed. Each piece added painstakingly, scrupulously with infinite care, throughout the years.

It wasn’t big. The mountains ringed it on all sides. The valley was a level bowl, surrounded by dark violet hills. Outside, beyond the hills, the regular world began. Parched fields. Blasted, poverty-stricken towns. Decayed roads. The remains of houses, tumbled-down farm buildings.

Ruined cars and machinery. Dust-covered people creeping listlessly around in hand-made clothing, dull rags and tatters.

He had seen the outside. He knew what it was like. At the mountains the blank faces, the disease, the withered crops, the crude plows and ancient tools all ended here. Here, within the ring of hills, Bors had constructed an accurate and detailed reproduction of a society two centuries gone. The world as it had been in the old days. The time of governments. The time that had been pulled down by the Anarchist League.

Within his five synapsis-coils the plans, knowledge, information, blueprints of a whole world existed. In the two centuries he had carefully recreated that world, had made this miniature society that glittered and hummed on all sides of him. The roads, buildings, houses, industries of a dead world, all a fragment of the past, built with his hands, his own metal fingers and brain.

“Fowler,” Bors said.

Fowler came over. He looked haggard. His eyes were red-rimmed and swollen. “What is it? You want to go inside?”

Overhead, the morning patrol thundered past. A string of black dots against the sunny, cloudless sky. Bors watched with satisfaction. “Quite a sight.”

“Right on the nose,” Fowler agreed, examining his wristwatch. To their right, a column of heavy tanks snaked along a highway between green fields. Their gun-snouts glittered. Behind them a column of foot soldiers marched, faces hidden behind bacteria masks.

“I’m thinking,” Bors said, “that it may be unwise to trust Green any longer.”

“Why the hell do you say that?”

“Every ten days I’m inactivated. So your crew can see what repairs are needed.” Bors twisted restlessly. “For twelve hours I’m completely helpless. Green takes care of me. Sees nothing happens. But —”

“But what?”

“It occurs to me perhaps there’d be more safety in a squad of troops. It’s too much of a temptation for one man, alone.”

Fowler scowled. “I don’t see that. How about me? I have charge of inspecting you. I could switch a few leads around. Send a load through your synapsis-coils. Blow them out.”

Bors whirled wildly, then subsided. “True. You could do that.” After a moment he demanded, “But what would you gain? You know I’m the only one who can keep all this together. I’m the only one who knows how to maintain a planned society, not a disorderly chaos! If it weren’t for me, all this would collapse, and you’d have dust and ruins and weeds. The whole outside would come rushing in to take over!”

“Of course. So why worry about Green?”

Trucks of workers rumbled past. Loads of men in blue-green, sleeves rolled up, armloads of tools. A mining team, heading for the mountains.

“Take me inside,” Bors said abruptly.

Fowler called McLean. They hoisted Bors and carried him past the throngs of people, into the building, down the corridor and to his office. Officials and technicians moved respectfully out of the way as the great pitted, corroded tank was carried past.

“All right,” Bors said impatiently. “That’s all. You can go.”

Fowler and McLean left the luxurious office, with its lush carpets, furniture, drapes and rows of books. Bors was already bent over his desk, sorting through heaps of reports and papers.

Fowler shook his head, as they walked down the hall. “He won’t last much longer.”

“The motor system? Can’t we reinforce the —”

“I don’t mean that. He’s breaking up mentally. He can’t take the strain any longer.”

“None of us can,” McLean muttered.

“Running this thing is too much for him. Knowing it’s all dependent on him. Knowing as soon as he turns his back or lets down it’ll begin to come apart at the seams. A hell of a job, trying to shut out the real world. Keeping his model universe running.”

“He’s gone on a long time,” McLean said.

Fowler brooded. “Sooner or later we’re going to have to face the situation.” Gloomily, he ran his fingers along the blade of a large screwdriver. “He’s wearing out. Sooner or later somebody’s going to have to step in. As he continues to decay…” He stuck the screwdriver back in his belt, with his pliers and hammer and soldering iron. “One crossed wire.”

“What’s that?”

Fowler laughed. “Now he’s got me doing it. One crossed wire and — *poof*. But what then? That’s the big question.”

“Maybe,” McLean said softly, “you and I can then get off this rat race. You and I and all the rest of us. And live like human beings.”

“Rat race,” Fowler murmured. “Rats in a maze. Doing tricks. Performing chores thought up by somebody else.”

McLean caught Fowler’s eye. “By somebody of another species.”

Tolby struggled vaguely. Silence. A faint dripping close by. A beam pinned his body down. He was caught on all sides by the twisted wreck of the car. He was head down. The car was turned on its side. Off the road in a gully, wedged between two huge trees. Bent struts and smashed metal all around him. And bodies.

He pushed up with all his strength. The beam gave, and he managed to get to a sitting position. A tree branch had burst in the windshield. The black-haired girl, still turned toward the back seat, was impaled on it. The branch had driven through her spine, out her chest, and into the seat; she clutched at it with both hands, head limp, mouth half-open. The man beside her was also dead. His hands were gone; the windshield had burst around him. He lay in a heap among the remains of the dashboard and the bloody shine of his own internal organs.

Penn was dead. Neck snapped like a rotten broom handle. Tolby pushed his corpse aside and examined his daughter. Silvia didn’t stir. He put his ear to her shirt and listened. She was alive. Her heart beat faintly. Her bosom rose and fell against his ear.

He wound a handkerchief around her arm, where the flesh was ripped open and oozing blood. She was badly cut and scratched; one leg was doubled under her, obviously broken. Her clothes were ripped, her hair matted with blood. But she was alive. He pushed the twisted door open and stumbled out. A fiery tongue of afternoon sunlight struck him and he winced. He began to ease her limp body out of the car, past the twisted door-frame.

A sound.

Tolby glanced up, rigid. Something was coming. A whirring insect that rapidly descended. He let go of Silvia, crouched, glanced around, then lumbered awkwardly down the gully. He slid and fell and rolled among the green vines and jagged gray boulders. His gun gripped, he lay gasping in the moist shadows, peering, upward.

The insect landed. A small air-ship, jet-driven. The sight stunned him. He had heard about jets, seen photographs of them. Been briefed and lectured in the history-indoctrination courses at the League Camps. But to *see* a jet!

Men swarmed out. Uniformed men who started from the road, down the side of the gully, bodies crouched warily as they approached the wrecked car. They lugged heavy rifles. They looked grim and experienced, as they tore the car doors open and scrambled in.

“One’s gone,” a voice drifted to him.

“Must be around somewhere.”

“Look, this one’s alive! This woman. Started to crawl out. The rest all dead.”

Furious cursing. “Damn Laura! She should have leaped! The fanatic little fool!”

“Maybe she didn’t have time. God’s sake, the thing’s all the way through her.” Horror and shocked dismay. “We won’t hardly be able to get her loose.”

“Leave her.” The officer directing things waved the men back out of the car. “Leave them all.”

“How about this wounded one?”

The leader hesitated. “Kill her,” he said finally. He snatched a rifle and raised the butt. “The rest of you fan out and try to get the other one. He’s probably —”

Tolby fired, and the leader’s body broke in half. The lower part sank down slowly; the upper dissolved in ashy fragments. Tolby turned and began to move in a slow circle, firing as he crawled. He got two more of them before the rest retreated in panic to their jet-powered insect and slammed the lock.

He had the element of surprise. Now that was gone. They had strength and numbers. He was doomed. Already, the insect was rising. They’d be able to spot him easily from above. But he had saved Silvia. That was something.

He stumbled down a dried-up creek bed. He ran aimlessly; he had no place to go. He didn’t know the countryside, and he was on foot. He slipped on a stone and fell headlong. Pain and billowing darkness beat at him as he got unsteadily to his knees. His gun was gone, lost in the shrubbery. He spat broken teeth and blood. He peered wildly up at the blazing afternoon sky.

The insect was leaving. It hummed off toward the distant hills. It dwindled, became a black ball, a fly-speck, then disappeared.

Tolby waited a moment. Then he struggled up the side of the ravine to the wrecked car. They had gone to get help. They’d be back. Now was his only chance. If he could get Silvia out and down the road, into hiding. Maybe to a farmhouse. Back to town.

He reached the car and stood, dazed and stupefied. Three bodies remained, the two in the front seat, Penn in the back. But Silvia was gone.

They had taken her with them. Back where they came from. She had been dragged to the jet-driven insect; a trail of blood led from the car up the side of the gully to the highway.

With a violent shudder Tolby pulled himself together. He climbed into the car and pried loose Penn's gun from his belt. Silvia's ironite staff rested on the seat; he took that, too. Then he started off down the road, walking without haste, carefully, slowly.

An ironic thought plucked at his mind. He had found what they were after. The men in uniform. They were organized, responsible to a central authority. In a newly-assembled jet.

Beyond the hills was a government.

"Sir," Green said. He smoothed his short blond hair anxiously, his young face twisting.

Technicians and experts and ordinary people in droves were everywhere. The offices buzzed and echoed with the business of the day. Green pushed through the crowd and to the desk where Bors sat, propped up by two magnetic frames.

"Sir," Green said. "Something's happened."

Bors looked up. He pushed a metal-foil slate away and laid down his stylus. His eye cells clicked and flickered; deep inside his battered trunk motor gears whined. "What is it?"

Green came close. There was something in his face, an expression Bors had never seen before. A look of fear and glassy determination. A glazed, fanatic cast, as if his flesh had hardened to rock. "Sir, scouts contacted a League team moving North. They met the team outside Fairfax. The incident took place directly beyond the first road block."

Bors said nothing. On all sides, officials, experts, farmers, workmen, industrial managers, soldiers, people of all kinds buzzed and murmured and pushed forward impatiently. Trying to get to Bors' desk. Loaded down with problems to be solved, situations to be explained. The pressing business of

the day. Roads, factories, disease control. Repairs. Construction. Manufacture. Design. Planning. Urgent problems for Bors to consider and deal with. Problems that couldn't wait.

"Was the League team destroyed?" Bors said.

"One was killed. One was wounded and brought here." Green hesitated. "One escaped."

For a long time Bors was silent. Around him the people murmured and shuffled; he ignored them. All at once he pulled the vidscanner to him and snapped the circuit open. "One escaped? I don't like the sound of that."

"He shot three members of our scout unit. Including the leader. The others got frightened. They grabbed the injured girl and returned here."

Bors' massive head lifted. "They made a mistake. They should have located the one who escaped."

"This was the first time the situation —"

"I know," Bors said. "But it was an error. Better not to have touched them at all, than to have taken two and allowed the third to get away." He turned to the vidscanner. "Sound an emergency alert. Close down the factories. Arm the work crews and any male farmers capable of using weapons. Close every road. Remove the women and children to the undersurface shelters. Bring up the heavy guns and supplies. Suspend all non-military production and —" He considered. "Arrest everyone we're not sure of. On the C sheet. Have them shot." He snapped the scanner off.

"What'll happen?" Green demanded, shaken.

"The thing we've prepared for. Total war."

“We have weapons!” Green shouted excitedly. “In an hour there’ll be ten thousand men ready to fight. We have jet-driven ships. Heavy artillery. Bombs. Bacteria pellets. What’s the League? A lot of people with packs on their backs!”

“Yes,” Bors said. “A lot of people with packs on their backs.”

“How can they do anything? How can a bunch of anarchists organize? They have no structure, no control, no central power.”

“They have the whole world. A billion people.”

“Individuals! A club, not subject to law. Voluntary membership. We have disciplined organization. Every aspect of our economic life operates at maximum efficiency. We — you — have your thumb on everything. All you have to do is give the order. Set the machine in motion.”

Bors nodded slowly. “It’s true the anarchist can’t coordinate. The League can’t organize. It’s a paradox. Government by anarchists… Anti-government, actually. Instead of governing the world they tramp around to make sure no one else does.”

“Dog in the manger.”

“As you say, they’re actually a voluntary club of totally unorganized individuals. Without law or central authority. They maintain no society — they can’t govern. All they can do is interfere with anyone else who tries. Troublemakers. But —”

“But what?”

“It was this way before. Two centuries ago. They were unorganized. Unarmed. Vast mobs, without discipline or authority. Yet they pulled down all the governments. All over the world.”

“We’ve got a whole army. All the roads are mined. Heavy guns. Bombs. Pellets. Every one of us is a soldier. We’re an armed camp!”

Bors was deep in thought. “You say one of them is here? One of the League agents?”

“A young woman.”

Bors signalled the nearby maintenance crew. “Take me to her. I want to talk to her in the time remaining.”

Silvia watched silently, as the uniformed men pushed and grunted their way into the room. They staggered over to the bed, pulled two chairs together, and carefully laid down their massive armload.

Quickly they snapped protective struts into place, locked the chairs together, threw magnetic grapples into operation, and then warily retreated.

“All right,” the robot said. “You can go.” The men left. Bors turned to face the woman on the bed.

“A machine,” Silvia whispered, white-faced. “You’re a machine.”

Bors nodded slightly without speaking.

Silvia shifted uneasily on the bed. She was weak. One leg was in a transparent plastic cast. Her face was bandaged and her right arm ached and throbbed. Outside the window, the late afternoon sun sprinkled through the drapes. Flowers bloomed. Grass. Hedges. And beyond the hedges, buildings and factories.

For the last hour the sky had been filled with jet-driven ships. Great flocks that raced excitedly across the sky toward distant hills. Along the highway cars hurtled, dragging guns and heavy military equipment. Men were marching in close rank, rows of gray-clad soldiers, guns and helmets

and bacteria masks. Endless lines of figures, identical in their uniforms, stamped from the same matrix.

“There are a lot of them,” Bors said, indicating the marching men.

“Yes.” Silvia watched a couple of soldiers hurry by the window. Youths with worried expressions on their smooth faces. Helmets bobbing at their waists. Long rifles. Canteens. Counters. Radiation shields. Bacteria masks wound awkwardly around their necks, ready to go into place. They were scared. Hardly more than kids. Others followed. A truck roared into life. The soldiers were swept off to join the others.

“They’re going to fight,” Bors said, “to defend their homes and factories.”

“All this equipment. You manufacture it, don’t you?”

“That’s right. Our industrial organization is perfect. We’re totally productive. Our society here is operated rationally. Scientifically. We’re fully prepared to meet this emergency.”

Suddenly Silvia realized what the emergency was. “The League! One of us must have got away.” She pulled herself up. “Which of them? Penn or my father?”

“I don’t know,” the robot murmured indifferently.

Horror and disgust choked Silvia. “My God,” she said softly. “You have no understanding of us. You run all this, and you’re incapable of empathy. You’re nothing but a mechanical computer. One of the old government integration robots.”

“That’s right. Two centuries old.”

She was appalled. “And you’ve been alive all this time. We thought we destroyed all of you!”

“I was missed. I had been damaged. I wasn’t in my place. I was in a truck, on my way out of Washington. I saw the mobs and escaped.”

“Two hundred years ago. Legendary times. You actually saw the events they tell us about. The old days. The great marches. The day the governments fell.”

“Yes. I saw it all. A group of us formed in Virginia. Experts, officials, skilled workmen. Later we came here. It was remote enough, off the beaten path.”

“We heard rumors. A fragment… still maintaining itself. But we didn’t know where or how.”

“I was fortunate,” Bors said. “I escaped by a fluke. All the others were destroyed. It’s taken a long time to organize what you see here. Fifteen miles from here is a ring of hills. This valley is a bowl — mountains on all sides. We’ve set up road blocks in the form of natural slides. Nobody comes here. Even in Fairfax, thirty miles off, they know nothing.”

“That girl. Laura.”

“Scouts. We keep scout teams in all inhabited regions within a hundred mile radius. As soon as you entered Fairfax, word was relayed to us. An air unit was dispatched. To avoid questions, we arranged to have you killed in an auto Wreck. But one of you escaped.”

Silvia shook her head, bewildered. “How?” she demanded. “How do you keep going? Don’t the people revolt?” She struggled to a sitting position. “They must know what’s happened everywhere else. How do you control them? They’re going out now, in their uniforms. But — w*ill they fight? Can you count on them?”*

Bors answered slowly. “They trust me,” he said. “I brought with me a vast amount of knowledge. Information and techniques lost to the rest of the world. Are jet-ships and vidscanners and power cables made anywhere else in the world? I retain all that knowledge. I have memory units, synapsis-coils. Because of me they have these things. Things you know only as dim memories, vague legends.”

“What happens when you die?”

“I won’t die! I’m eternal!”

“You’re wearing out. You have to be carried around. And your right arm. You can hardly move it!” Silvia’s voice was harsh, ruthless. “Your whole tank is pitted and rusty.”

The robot whirred; for a moment he seemed unable to speak. “My knowledge remains,” he grated finally. “I’ll always be able to communicate. Fowler has arranged a broadcast system. Even when I talk —” He broke off. “Even then. Everything is under control. I’ve organized every aspect of the situation. I’ve maintained this system for two centuries. It’s got to be kept going!”

Silvia lashed out. It happened in a split second. The boot of her cast caught the chairs on which the robot rested. She thrust violently with her foot and hands; the chairs teetered, hesitated —

“Fowler!” the robot screamed.

Silvia pushed with all her strength. Blinding agony seared through her leg; she bit her lip and threw her shoulder against the robot’s pitted hulk. He waved his arms, whirred wildly, and then the two chairs slowly collapsed. The robot slid quietly from them, over on his back, his arms still waving helplessly.

Silvia dragged herself from the bed. She managed to pull herself to the window; her broken leg hung uselessly, a dead weight in its transparent plastic cast. The robot lay like some futile bug, arms waving, eye lens clicking, its rusty works whirring in fear and rage.

“Fowler!” it screamed again. “Help me!”

Silvia reached the window. She tugged at the locks; they were sealed. She grabbed up a lamp from the table and threw it against the glass. The glass burst around her, a shower of lethal fragments. She stumbled forward — and then the repair crew was pouring into the room.

Fowler gasped at the sight of the robot on its back. A strange expression crossed his face. “Look at him!”

“Help me!” the robot shrilled. “Help me!”

One of the men grabbed Silvia around the waist and lugged her back to the bed. She kicked and bit, sunk her nails into the man’s cheek. He threw her on the bed, face down, and drew his pistol. “Stay there,” he gasped.

The others were bent over the robot, getting him to an upright position.

“What happened?” Fowler said. He came over to the bed, his face twisting. “Did he fall?”

Silvia’s eyes glowed with hatred and despair. “I pushed him over. I almost got there.” Her chest heaved. “The window. But my leg —”

“Get me back to my quarters!” Bors cried.

The crew gathered him up and carried him down the hall, to his private office. A few moments later he was sitting shakily at his desk, his mechanism pounding wildly, surrounded by his papers and memoranda.

He forced down his panic and tried to resume his work. He had to keep going. His vidscreen was alive with activity. The whole system was in motion. He blankly watched a subcommander sending up a cloud of black dots, jet bombers that shot up like flies and headed quickly off.

The system had to be preserved. He repeated it again and again. He had to save it. Had to organize the people and make *them* save it. If the people didn't fight, wasn't everything doomed?

Fury and desperation overwhelmed him. The system couldn't preserve itself; it wasn't a thing apart, something that could be separated from the people who lived it. Actually it *was* the people. They were identical; when the people fought to preserve the system they were fighting to preserve nothing less than themselves.

They existed only as long as the system existed.

He caught sight of a marching column of white-faced troops, moving toward the hills. His ancient synapsis-coils radiated and shuddered uncertainly, then fell back into pattern. He was two centuries old. He had come into existence a long time ago, in a different world. That world had created him; through him that world still lived. As long as he existed, that world existed. In miniature, it still functioned. His model universe, his recreation. His rational, controlled world, in which each aspect was fully organized, fully analyzed and integrated.

He kept a rational, progressive world alive. A humming oasis of productivity on a dusty, parched planet of decay and silence.

Bors spread out his papers and went to work on the most pressing problem. The transformation from a peace-time economy to full military mobilization. Total military organization of every man, woman, child, piece of equipment and dyne of energy under his direction.

Edward Tolby emerged cautiously. His clothes were torn and ragged. He had lost his pack, crawling through the brambles and vines. His face and hands were bleeding. He was utterly exhausted.

Below him lay a valley. A vast bowl. Fields, houses, highways. Factories. Equipment. Men.

He had been watching the men three hours. Endless streams of them, pouring from the valley into the hills, along the roads and paths. On foot, in trucks, in cars, armored tanks, weapons carriers. Overhead, in fast little jet-fighters and great lumbering bombers. Gleaming ships that took up positions above the troops and prepared for battle.

Battle in the grand style. The two-centuries-old full-scale war that was supposed to have disappeared. But here it was, a vision from the past. He had seen this in the old tapes and records, used in the camp orientation courses. A ghost army resurrected to fight again. A vast host of men and guns, prepared to fight and die.

Tolby climbed down cautiously. At the foot of a slope of boulders a soldier had halted his motorcycle and was setting up a communications antenna and transmitter. Tolby circled, crouched, expertly approached him. A blond-haired youth, fumbling nervously with the wires and relays, licking his lips uneasily, glancing up and grabbing for his rifle at every sound

Tolby took a deep breath. The youth had turned his back; he was tracing a power circuit. It was now or never. With one stride Tolby stepped out, raised his pistol and fired. The clump of equipment and the soldier’s rifle vanished.

“Don’t make a sound,” Tolby said. He peered around. No one had seen; the main line was half a mile to his right. The sun was setting. Great shadows were falling over the hills. The fields were rapidly fading from brown-green to a deep violet. “Put your hands up over your head, clasp them, and get down on your knees.”

The youth tumbled down in a frightened heap. “What are you going to do?” He saw the ironite staff, and the color left his face. “You’re a League agent!”

“Shut up,” Tolby ordered. “First, outline your system of responsibility. *Who’s your superior?”*

The youth stuttered forth what he knew. Tolby listened intently. He was satisfied. The usual monolithic structure. Exactly what he wanted.

“At the top,” he broke in. “At the top of the pillar. Who has ultimate responsibility?”

“Bors.”

“Bors!” Tolby scowled. “That doesn’t sound like a name. Sounds like —” He broke off, staggered. “We should have guessed! An old government robot. Still functioning.”

The youth saw his chance. He leaped up and darted frantically away.

Tolby shot him above the left ear. The youth pitched over on his face and lay still. Tolby hurried to him and quickly pulled off his dark gray uniform. It was too small for him of course. But the motorcycle was just right. He’d seen tapes of them; he’d wanted one since he was a child. A fast little motorcycle to propel his weight around. Now he had it.

Half an hour later he was roaring down a smooth, broad highway toward the center of the valley and the buildings that rose against the dark sky. His headlights cut into the blackness; he still wobbled from side to side, but for all practical purposes he had the hang of it. He increased speed; the road shot by, trees and fields, haystacks, stalled farm equipment. All traffic was going against him, troops hurrying to the front.

The front. Lemmings going out into the ocean to drown. A thousand, ten thousand, metal-clad figures, armed and alert. Weighted down with guns and bombs and flame throwers and bacteria pellets.

There was only one hitch. No army opposed them. A mistake had been made. It took two sides to make a war, and only one had been resurrected.

A mile outside the concentration of buildings he pulled his motorcycle off the road and carefully hid it in a haystack. For a moment he considered leaving his ironite staff. Then he shrugged and grabbed it up, along with his pistol. He always carried his staff, it was the League symbol. It represented the walking Anarchists who patrolled the world on foot, the world's protection agency.

He loped through the darkness toward the outline ahead. There were fewer men here. He saw no women or children. Ahead, charged wire was set up. Troops crouched behind it, armed to the teeth. A searchlight moved back and forth across the road. Behind it, radar vanes loomed and behind them an ugly square of concrete. The great offices from which the government was run.

For a time he watched the searchlight. Finally he had its motion plotted. In its glare, the faces of the troops stood out, pale and drawn. Youths. They had never fought. This was their first encounter. They were terrified.

When the light was off him, he stood up and advanced toward the wire. Automatically, a breach was slid back for him. Two guards raised up and awkwardly crossed bayonets ahead of him.

"Show your papers!" one demanded. Young lieutenants. Boys, white-lipped, nervous. Playing soldier.

Pity and contempt made Tolby laugh harshly and push forward. "Get out of my way."

One anxiously flashed a pocket light. “Halt! What’s the code-key for this watch?” He blocked Tolby’s way with his bayonet, hands twisting convulsively.

Tolby reached in his pocket, pulled out his pistol, and as the searchlight started to swerve back, blasted the two guards. The bayonets clattered down and he dived forward. Yells and shapes rose on all sides. Anguished, terrified shouts. Random firing. The night was lit up, as he dashed and crouched, turned a corner past a supply warehouse, raced up a flight of stairs and into the massive building ahead.

He had to work fast. Gripping his ironite staff, he plunged down a gloomy corridor. His boots echoed. Men poured into the building behind him. Bolts of energy thundered past him; a whole section of the ceiling burst into ash and collapsed behind him.

He reached stairs and climbed rapidly. He came to the next floor and groped for the door handle. Something flickered behind him. He half-turned, his gun quickly up —

A stunning blow sent him sprawling. He crashed against the wall; his gun flew from his fingers. A shape bent over him, rifle gripped. “Who are you? What are you doing here?”

Not a soldier. A stubble-chinned man in stained shirt and rumpled trousers. Eyes puffy and red. A belt of tools, hammer, pliers, screwdriver, a soldering iron, around his waist.

Tolby raised himself up painfully. “If you didn’t have that rifle —”

Fowler backed warily away. “Who are you? This floor is forbidden to troops of the line. You know this -” Then he saw the ironite staff. “By God,” he said softly. “You’re the one they didn’t get.” He laughed shakily. “You’re the one who got away.”

Tolby’s fingers tightened around the staff, but Fowler reacted instantly. The snout of the rifle jerked up, on a line with Tolby’s face.

“Be careful,” Fowler warned. He turned slightly; soldiers were hurrying up the stairs, boots drumming, echoing shouts ringing. For a moment he hesitated, then waved his rifle toward the stairs ahead. “Up. Get going.”

Toby blinked. “What —”

“Up!” The rifle snout jabbed into Tolby. “Hurry!”

Bewildered, Tolby hurried up the stairs, Fowler close behind him. At the third floor Fowler pushed him roughly through the doorway, the snout of his rifle digging urgently into his back. He found himself in a corridor of doors. Endless offices.

“Keep going,” Fowler snarled. “Down the hall. Hurry!”

Tolby hurried, his mind spinning. “What the hell are you —”

“I could never do it,” Fowler gasped, close to his ear. “Not in a million years. But it’s got to be done.”

Tolby halted.

“What is this?”

They faced each other defiantly, faces contorted, eyes blazing. “He’s in there,” Fowler snapped, indicating a door with his rifle. “You have one chance. Take it.”

For a fraction of a second Tolby hesitated. Then he broke away. “Okay. I’ll take it.”

Fowler followed after him. “Be careful. Watch your step. There’s a series of check points. Keep going straight, in all the way. As far as you can go. And for God’s sake, hurry!”

His voice faded, as Tolby gained speed. He reached the door and tore it open.

Soldiers and officials ballooned. He threw himself against them; they sprawled and scattered. He scrambled on, as they struggled up and stupidly fumbled for their guns. Through another door, into an inner office, past a desk where a frightened girl sat, eyes wide, mouth open. Then a third door, into an alcove.

A wild-faced youth leaped up and snatched frantically for his pistol. Tolby was unarmed, trapped in the alcove. Figures already pushed against the door behind him. He gripped his ironite staff and backed away as the blond-haired fanatic fired blindly. The bolt burst a foot away; it flicked him with a tongue of heat.

“You dirty anarchist!” Green screamed. His face distorted, he fired again and again. “You murdering anarchist spy!”

Tolby hurled his ironite staff. He put all his strength in it; the staff leaped through the air in a whistling arc, straight at the youth’s head. Green saw it coming and ducked. Agile and quick, he jumped away, grinning humorlessly. The staff crashed against the wall and rolled clanging to the floor.

“Your walking staff!” Green gasped and fired.

The bolt missed him on purpose. Green was playing games with him. Tolby bent down and groped frantically for the staff. He picked it up. Green watched, face rigid, eyes glittering. “Throw it again!” he snarled.

Tolby leaped. He took the youth by surprise. Green grunted, stumbled back from the impact, then suddenly fought with maniacal fury.

Tolby was heavier. But he was exhausted. He had crawled hours, beat his way through the mountains, walked endlessly. He was at the end of his strength. The car wreck, the days of walking. Green was in perfect shape. His wiry, agile body twisted away. His hands came up. Fingers dug into Tolby's windpipe; he kicked the youth in the groin. Green staggered back, convulsed and bent over with pain.

"All right," Green gasped, face ugly and dark. His hand fumbled with his pistol. The barrel came up.

Half of Green's head dissolved. His hands opened and his gun fell to the floor. His body stood for a moment, then settled down in a heap, like an empty suit of clothes.

Tolby caught a glimpse of a rifle snout pushed past him — and the man with the tool belt. The man waved him on frantically. "Hurry!"

Tolby raced down a carpeted hall, between two great flickering yellow lamps. A crowd of officials and soldiers stumbled uncertainly after him, shouting and firing at random. He tore open a thick oak door and halted.

He was in a luxurious chamber. Drapes, rich wallpaper. Lamps. Bookcases. A glimpse of the finery of the past. The wealth of the old days. Thick carpets. Warm radiant heat. A vidscreen. At the far end, a huge mahogany desk.

At the desk a figure sat. Working on heaps of papers and reports, piled masses of material. The figure contrasted starkly with the lushness of the furnishings. It was a great pitted, corroded tank of metal. Bent and greenish, patched and repaired. An ancient machine.

"Is that you, Fowler?" the robot demanded.

Tolby advanced, his ironite staff gripped.

The robot turned angrily. “Who is it? Get Green and carry me down into the shelter. One of the roadblocks has reported a League agent already —” The robot broke off. Its cold, mechanical eye lens bored up at the man. It clicked and whirred in uneasy astonishment. “I don’t know you.”

It saw the ironite staff.

“League agent,” the robot said. “You’re the one who got through.” Comprehension came. “*The third one.* You came here. You didn’t go back.” Its metal fingers fumbled clumsily at the objects on the desk, then in the drawer. It found a gun and raised it awkwardly.

Tolby knocked the gun away; it clattered to the floor.

“Run!” he shouted at the robot. “Start running!”

It remained. Tolby’s staff came down. The fragile, complex brain-unit of the robot burst apart. Coils, wiring, relay fluid, spattered over his arms and hands. The robot shuddered. Its machinery thrashed. It half-rose from its chair, then swayed and toppled. It crashed full length on the floor, parts and gears rolling in all directions.

“Good God,” Tolby said, suddenly seeing it for the first time. Shakily, he bent over its remains. “It was crippled.”

Men were all around him. “He’s killed Bors!” Shocked, dazed faces. “Bors is dead!”

Fowler came up slowly. “You got him, all right. There’s nothing left now.”

Tolby stood holding his ironite staff in his hands. “The poor blasted thing,” he said softly. “Completely helpless. Sitting there and I came and

killed him. He didn’t have a chance.”

The building was bedlam. Soldiers and officials scurried crazily about, grief-stricken, hysterical. They bumped into each other, gathered in knots, shouted and gave meaningless orders.

Tolby pushed past them; nobody paid any attention to him. Fowler was gathering up the remains of the robot. Collecting the smashed pieces and bits. Tolby stopped beside him. Like Humpty-Dumpty, pulled down off his wall he’d never be back together, not now.

“Where’s the woman?” he asked Fowler. “The League agent they brought in.”

Fowler straightened up slowly. “I’ll take you.” He led Tolby down the packed, surging hall, to the hospital wing of the building.

Silvia sat up apprehensively as the two men entered the room. “What’s going on?” She recognized her father. “Dad! Thank God! It was you who got out.”

Tolby slammed the door against the chaos of sound hammering up and down the corridor. “How are you? How’s your leg?”

“Mending. What happened?”

“I got him. The robot. He’s dead.”

For a moment the three of them were silent. Outside, in the halls, men ran frantically back and forth. Word had already leaked out. Troops gathered in huddled knots outside the building. Lost men, wandering away from their posts. Uncertain. Aimless.

“It’s over,” Fowler said.

Tolby nodded. “I know.”

“They’ll get tired of crouching in their foxholes,” Fowler said. “They’ll come filtering back. As soon as the news reaches them, they’ll desert and throw away their equipment.”

“Good,” Tolby grunted. “The sooner the better.” He touched Fowler’s rifle. “You, too, I hope.”

Silvia hesitated. “Do you think —”

“Think what?”

“Did we make a mistake?”

Tolby grinned wearily. “Hell of a time to think about that.”

“He was doing what he thought was right. They built up their homes and factories. This whole area… They turn out a lot of goods. I’ve been watching through the window. It’s made me think. They’ve done so much. Made so much.”

“Made a lot of guns,” Tolby said.

“We have guns, too. We kill and destroy. We have all the disadvantages and none of the advantages.”

“We don’t have war,” Tolby answered quietly. “To defend this neat little organization there are ten thousand men up there in those hills. All waiting to fight. Waiting to drop their bombs and bacteria pellets, to keep this place running. But they won’t. Pretty soon they’ll give up and start to trickle back.”

“This whole system will decay rapidly,” Fowler said. “He was already losing his control. He couldn’t keep the clock back much longer.”

“Anyhow, it’s done,” Silvia murmured. “We did our job.” She smiled a little. “Bors did his job and we did ours. But the times were against him and with us.”

“That’s right,” Tolby agreed. “We did our job. And we’ll never be sorry.”

Fowler said nothing. He stood with his hands in his pockets, gazing silently out the window. His fingers were touching something. Three undamaged synapsis-coils. Intact memory elements from the dead robot, snatched from the scattered remains.

Just in case, he said to himself. *Just in case the times change.*

The Father-Thing

“Dinner’s ready,” commanded Mrs. Walton. “Go get your father and tell him to wash his hands. The same applies to you, young man.” She carried a steaming casserole to the neatly set table. “You’ll find him out in the garage.”

Charles hesitated. He was only eight years old, and the problem bothering him would have confounded Hillel. “I —” he began uncertainly.

“What’s wrong?” June Walton caught the uneasy tone in her son’s voice and her matronly bosom fluttered with sudden alarm. “Isn’t Ted out in the garage? For heaven’s sake, he was sharpening the hedge shears a minute ago. He didn’t go over to the Andersons’, did he? I told him dinner was practically on the table.”

“He’s in the garage,” Charles said. “But he’s — talking to himself.”

“Talking to himself!” Mrs. Walton removed her bright plastic apron and hung it over the doorknob. “Ted? Why, he never talks to himself. Go tell him to come in here.” She poured boiling black coffee in the little blue-and-white china cups and began ladling out creamed corn. “What’s wrong with you? Go tell him!”

“I don’t know which of them to tell.” Charles blurted out desperately. “They both look alike.”

June Walton’s fingers lost their hold on the aluminum pan; for a moment the creamed corn slushed dangerously. “Young man —” she began angrily, but at that moment Ted Walton came striding into the kitchen, inhaling and sniffing and rubbing his hands together.

“Ah,” he cried happily. “Lamb stew.”

“Beef stew,” June murmured. “Ted, what were you doing out there?”

Ted threw himself down at his place and unfolded his napkin. “I got the shears sharpened like a razor. Oiled and sharpened. Better not touch them — they’ll cut your hand off.” He was a good-looking man in his early thirties; thick blond hair, strong arms, competent hands, square face and flashing brown eyes. “Man, this stew looks good. Hard day at the office — Friday, you know. Stuff piles up and we have to get all the accounts out by five. Al McKinley claims the department could handle 20 per cent more stuff if we organized our lunch hours; staggered them so somebody was there all the time.” He beckoned Charles over. “Sit down and let’s go.”

Mrs. Walton served the frozen peas. “Ted,” she said, as she slowly took her seat, “is there anything on your mind?”

“On my mind?” He blinked. “No, nothing unusual. Just the regular stuff. Why?”

Uneasily, June Walton glanced over at her son. Charles was sitting bolt-upright at his place, face expressionless, white as chalk. He hadn’t moved, hadn’t unfolded his napkin or even touched his milk. A tension was in the air; she could feel it. Charles had pulled his chair away from his father’s; he was huddled in a tense little bundle as far from his father as possible. His lips were moving, but she couldn’t catch what he was saying.

“What is it?” she demanded, leaning toward him.

“The other one,” Charles was muttering under his breath. “The other one came in.”

“What do you mean, dear?” June Walton asked out loud. “What other one?”

Ted jerked. A strange expression flitted across his face. It vanished at once; but in the brief instant Ted Walton’s face lost all familiarity.

Something alien and cold gleamed out, a twisting, wriggling mass. The eyes blurred and receded, as an archaic sheen filmed over them. The ordinary look of a tired, middle-aged husband was gone.

And then it was back — or nearly back. Ted grinned and began to wolf down his stew and frozen peas and creamed corn. He laughed, stirred his coffee, kidded and ate. But something terrible was wrong.

“The other one,” Charles muttered, face white, hands beginning to tremble. Suddenly he leaped up and backed away from the table. “Get away!” he shouted. “Get out of here!”

“Hey,” Ted rumbled ominously. “What’s got into you?” He pointed sternly at the boy’s chair. “You sit down there and eat your dinner, young man. Your mother didn’t fix it for nothing.”

Charles turned and ran out of the kitchen, upstairs to his room. June Walton gasped and fluttered in dismay. “What in the world —”

Ted went on eating. His face was grim; his eyes were hard and dark. “That kid,” he grated, “is going to have to learn a few things. Maybe he and I need to have a little private conference together.”

Charles crouched and listened.

The father-thing was coming up the stairs, nearer and nearer. “Charles!” it shouted angrily. “Are you up there?”

He didn’t answer. Soundlessly, he moved back into his room and pulled the door shut. His heart was pounding heavily. The father-thing had reached the landing; in a moment it would come in his room.

He hurried to the window. He was terrified; it was already fumbling in the dark hall for the knob. He lifted the window and climbed out on the

roof. With a grunt he dropped into the flower garden that ran by the front door, staggered and gasped, then leaped to his feet and ran from the light that streamed out the window, a patch of yellow in the evening darkness.

He found the garage; it loomed up ahead, a black square against the skyline. Breathing quickly, he fumbled in his pocket for his flashlight, then cautiously slid the door up and entered.

The garage was empty. The car was parked out front. To the left was his father's workbench. Hammers and saws on the wooden walls. In the back were the lawnmower, rake, shovel, hoe. A drum of kerosene. License plates nailed up everywhere. Floor was concrete and dirt; a great oil slick stained the center, tufts of weeds greasy and black in the flickering beam of the flashlight.

Just inside the door was a big trash barrel. On top of the barrel were stacks of soggy newspapers and magazines, moldy and damp. A thick stench of decay issued from them as Charles began to move them around. Spiders dropped to the cement and scampered off; he crushed them with his foot and went on looking.

The sight made him shriek. He dropped the flashlight and leaped wildly back. The garage was plunged into instant gloom. He forced himself to kneel down, and for an ageless moment, he groped in the darkness for the light, among the spiders and greasy weeds. Finally he had it again. He managed to turn the beam down into the barrel, down the well he had made by pushing back the piles of magazines.

The father-thing had stuffed it down in the very bottom of the barrel. Among the old leaves and torn-up cardboard, the rotting remains of magazines and curtains, rubbish from the attic his mother had lugged down here with the idea of burning someday. It still looked a little like his father enough for him to recognize. He had found it — and the sight made him sick at his stomach. He hung onto the barrel and shut his eyes until finally he was able to look again. In the barrel were the remains of his father, his real father. Bits the father-thing had no use for. Bits it had discarded.

He got the rake and pushed it down to stir the remains. They were dry. They cracked and broke at the touch of the rake. They were like a discarded snake skin, flaky and crumbling, rustling at the touch. *An empty skin.* The insides were gone. The important part. This was all that remained, just the brittle, cracking skin, wadded down at the bottom of the trash barrel in a little heap. This was all the father-thing had left; it had eaten the rest. Taken the insides — and his father's place.

A sound.

He dropped the rake and hurried to the door. The father-thing was coming down the path, toward the garage. Its shoes crushed the gravel; it felt its way along uncertainly. "Charles!" it called angrily. "Are you in there? Wait'll I get my hands on you, young man!"

His mother's ample, nervous shape was outlined in the bright doorway of the house. "Ted, please don't hurt him. He's all upset about something."

"I'm not going to hurt him," the father-thing rasped; it halted to strike a match. "I'm just going to have a little talk with him. He needs to learn better manners. Leaving the table like that and running out at night, climbing down there off —"

Charles slipped from the garage; the glare of the match caught his moving shape, and with a bellow the father-thing lunged forward.

"Come here!"

Charles ran. He knew the ground better than the father-thing; it knew a lot, had taken a lot when it got his father's insides, but nobody knew the way like *he* did. He reached the fence, climbed it, leaped into the Andersons' yard, raced past their clothesline, down the path around the side of their house, and out on Maple Street.

He listened, crouched down and not breathing. The father-thing hadn’t come after him. It had gone back. Or it was coming around the sidewalk.

He took a deep, shuddering breath. He had to keep moving. Sooner or later it would find him. He glanced right and left, made sure it wasn’t watching, and then started off at a rapid dog-trot.

“What do you want?” Tony Peretti demanded belligerently. Tony was fourteen. He was sitting at the table in the oak-panelled Peretti dining room, books and pencils scattered around him, half a ham-and-peanut butter sandwich and a Coke beside him. “You’re Walton, aren’t you?”

Tony Peretti had a job uncrating stoves and refrigerators after school at Johnson’s Appliance Shop, downtown. He was big and blunt-faced. Black hair, olive skin, white teeth. A couple of times he had beaten up Charles; he had beaten up every kid in the neighborhood.

Charles twisted. “Say, Peretti. Do me a favor?”

“What do you want?” Peretti was annoyed. “You looking for a bruise?”

Gazing unhappily down, his fists clenched, Charles explained what had happened in short, mumbled words.

When he had finished, Peretti let out a low whistle. “No kidding.”

“It’s true.” He nodded quickly. “I’ll show you. Come on and I’ll show you.”

Peretti got slowly to his feet. “Yeah, show me. I want to see.”

He got his b.b. gun from his room, and the two of them walked silently up the dark street, toward Charles’ house. Neither of them said much. Peretti was deep in thought, serious and solemn-faced. Charles was still dazed; his mind was completely blank.

They turned down the Anderson driveway, cut through the back yard, climbed the fence, and lowered themselves cautiously into Charles' back yard. There was no movement. The yard was silent. The front door of the house was closed.

They peered through the living room window. The shades were down, but a narrow crack of yellow streamed out. Sitting on the couch was Mrs. Walton, sewing a cotton T-shirt. There was a sad, troubled look on her large face. She worked listlessly, without interest. Opposite her was the father-thing. Leaning back in his father's easy chair, its shoes off, reading the evening newspaper. The TV was on, playing to itself in the corner. A can of beer rested on the arm of the easy chair. The father-thing sat exactly as his own father had sat; it had learned a lot.

"Looks just like him," Peretti whispered suspiciously. "You sure you're not bulling me?"

Charles led him to the garage and showed him the trash barrel. Peretti reached his long tanned arms down and carefully pulled up the dry, flaking remains. They spread out, unfolded, until the whole figure of his father was outlined. Peretti laid the remains on the floor and pieced broken parts back into place. The remains were colorless. Almost transparent. An amber yellow, thin as paper. Dry and utterly lifeless.

"That's all," Charles said. Tears welled up in his eyes. "That's all that's left of him. The thing has the insides."

Peretti had turned pale. Shakily, he crammed the remains back in the trash barrel. "This is really something," he muttered. "You say you saw the two of them together?"

"Talking. They looked exactly alike. I ran inside." Charles wiped the tears away and sniveled; he couldn't hold it back any longer. "It ate him while I was inside. Then it came in the house. It pretended it was him. But it isn't. It killed him and ate his insides."

For a moment Peretti was silent. “I’ll tell you something,” he said suddenly. “I’ve heard about this sort of thing. It’s a bad business. You have to use your head and not get scared. You’re not scared, are you?”

“No,” Charles managed to mutter.

“The first thing we have to do is figure out how to kill it.” He rattled his b.b. gun. “I don’t know if this’ll work. It must be plenty tough to get hold of your father. He was a big man.” Peretti considered. “Let’s get out of here. It might come back. They say that’s what a murderer does.”

They left the garage. Peretti crouched down and peeked through the window again. Mrs. Walton had got to her feet. She was talking anxiously. Vague sounds filtered out. The father-thing threw down its newspaper. They were arguing.

“For God’s sake!” the father-thing shouted. “Don’t do anything stupid like that.”

“Something’s wrong,” Mrs. Walton moaned. “Something terrible. Just let me call the hospital and see.”

“Don’t call anybody. He’s all right. Probably up the street playing.”

“He’s never out this late. He never disobeys. He was terribly upset — afraid of you! I don’t blame him.” Her voice broke with misery. “What’s wrong with you? You’re so strange.” She moved out of the room, into the hall. “I’m going to call some of the neighbors.”

The father-thing glared after her until she had disappeared. Then a terrifying thing happened. Charles gasped; even Peretti grunted under his breath.

“Look,” Charles muttered. “What —”

“Golly,” Peretti said, black eyes wide.

As soon as Mrs. Walton was gone from the room, the father-thing sagged in its chair. It became limp. Its mouth fell open. Its eyes peered vacantly. Its head fell forward, like a discarded rag doll.

Peretti moved away from the window. “That’s it,” he whispered. “That’s the whole thing.”

“What is it?” Charles demanded. He was shocked and bewildered. “It looked like somebody turned off its power.”

“Exactly.” Peretti nodded slowly, grim and shaken. “It’s controlled from outside.”

Horror settled over Charles. “You mean, something outside our world?”

Peretti shook his head with disgust. “Outside the house! In the yard. You know how to find?”

“Not very well.” Charles pulled his mind together. “But I know somebody who’s good at finding.” He forced his mind to summon the name. “Bobby Daniels.”

“That little black kid? Is he good at finding?”

“The best.”

“All right,” Peretti said. “Let’s go get him. We have to find the thing that’s outside. That made *it* in there, and keeps it going…”

“It’s near the garage,” Peretti said to the small, thin-faced Negro boy who crouched beside them in the darkness. “When it got him, he was in the garage. So look there.”

“In the garage?” Daniels asked.

“*Around* the garage. Walton’s already gone over the garage, inside. Look around outside. Nearby.”

There was a small bed of flowers growing by the garage, and a great tangle of bamboo and discarded debris between the garage and the back of the house. The moon had come out; a cold, misty light filtered down over everything. “If we don’t find it pretty soon,” Daniels said, “I got to go back home. I can’t stay up much later.” He wasn’t any older than Charles. Perhaps nine.

“All right,” Peretti agreed. “Then get looking.”

The three of them spread out and began to go over the ground with care. Daniels worked with incredible speed; his thin little body moved in a blur of motion as he crawled among the flowers, turned over rocks, peered under the house, separated stalks of plants, ran his expert hands over leaves and stems, in tangles of compost and weeds. No inch was missed.

Peretti halted after a short time. “I’ll guard. It might be dangerous. The father-thing might come and try to stop us.” He posted himself on the back step with his b.b. gun while Charles and Bobby Daniels searched. Charles worked slowly. He was tired, and his body was cold and numb. It seemed impossible, the father-thing and what had happened to his own father, his real father. But terror spurred him on; what if it happened to his mother, or to him? Or to everyone? Maybe the whole world.

“I found it!” Daniels called in a thin, high voice. “You all come around here quick!”

Peretti raised his gun and got up cautiously. Charles hurried over; he turned the flickering yellow beam of his flashlight where Daniels stood.

The Negro boy had raised a concrete stone. In the moist, rotting soil the light gleamed on a metallic body. A thin, jointed thing with endless crooked legs was digging frantically. Plated, like an ant; a red-brown bug that rapidly disappeared before their eyes. Its rows of legs scabbed and clutched. The ground gave rapidly under it. Its wicked-looking tail twisted furiously as it struggled down the tunnel it had made.

Peretti ran into the garage and grabbed up the rake. He pinned down the tail of the bug with it. “Quick! Shoot it with the b.b. gun!”

Daniels snatched the gun and took aim. The first shot tore the tail of the bug loose. It writhed and twisted frantically; its tail dragged uselessly and some of its legs broke off. It was a foot long, like a great millipede. It struggled desperately to escape down its hole.

“Shoot again,” Peretti ordered.

Daniels fumbled with the gun. The bug slithered and hissed. Its head jerked back and forth; it twisted and bit at the rake holding it down. Its wicked specks of eyes gleamed with hatred. For a moment it struck futilely at the rake; then abruptly, without warning, it thrashed in a frantic convulsion that made them all draw away in fear.

Something buzzed through Charles’ brain. A loud humming, metallic and harsh, a billion metal wires dancing and vibrating at once. He was tossed about violently by the force; the banging crash of metal made him deaf and confused. He stumbled to his feet and backed off; the others were doing the same, white-faced and shaken.

“If we can’t kill it with the gun,” Peretti gasped, “we can drown it. Or burn it. Or stick a pin through its brain.” He fought to hold onto the rake, to keep the bug pinned down.

“I have a jar of formaldehyde,” Daniels muttered. His fingers fumbled nervously with the b.b. gun. “How do this thing work? I can’t seem to —”

Charles grabbed the gun from him. “I’ll kill it.” He squatted down, one eye to the sight, and gripped the trigger. The bug lashed and struggled. Its force-field hammered in his ears, but he hung onto the gun. His finger tightened…

“All right, Charles,” the father-thing said. Powerful fingers gripped him, a paralyzing pressure around his wrists. The gun fell to the ground as he struggled futilely. The father-thing shoved against Peretti. The boy leaped away and the bug, free of the rake, slithered triumphantly down its tunnel.

“You have a spanking coming, Charles,” the father-thing droned on. “What got into you? Your poor mother’s out of her mind with worry.”

It had been there, hiding in the shadows. Crouched in the darkness watching them. Its calm, emotionless voice, a dreadful parody of his father’s, rumbled close to his ear as it pulled him relentlessly toward the garage. Its cold breath blew in his face, an icy-sweet odor, like decaying soil. Its strength was immense; there was nothing he could do.

“Don’t fight me,” it said calmly. “Come along, into the garage. This is for your own good. I know best, Charles.”

“Did you find him?” his mother called anxiously, opening the back door.

“Yes, I found him.”

“What are you going to do?”

“A little spanking.” The father-thing pushed up the garage door. “In the garage.” In the half-light a faint smile, humorless and utterly without emotion, touched its lips. “You go back in the living room, June. I’ll take care of this. It’s more in my line. You never did like punishing him.”

The back door reluctantly closed. As the light cut off, Peretti bent down and groped for the b.b. gun. The father-thing instantly froze. “Go on home,

boys," it rasped. Peretti stood undecided, gripping the b.b. gun.

"Get going," the father-thing repeated. "Put down that toy and get out of here." It moved slowly toward Peretti, gripping Charles with one hand, reaching toward Peretti with the other. "No b.b. guns allowed in town, sonny. Your father know you have that? There's a city ordinance. I think you better give me that before —"

Peretti shot it in the eye.

The father-thing grunted and pawed at its ruined eye. Abruptly it slashed out at Peretti. Peretti moved down the driveway, trying to cock the gun. The father-thing lunged. Its powerful fingers snatched the gun from Peretti's hands. Silently, the father-thing mashed the gun against the wall of the house.

Charles broke away and ran numbly off. Where could he hide? It was between him and the house. Already, it was coming back toward him, a black shape creeping carefully, peering into the darkness, trying to make him out. Charles retreated. If there were only some place he could hide…

The bamboo.

He crept quickly into the bamboo. The stalks were huge and old. They closed after him with a faint rustle. The father-thing was fumbling in its pocket; it lit a match, then the whole pack flared up. "Charles," it said. "I know you're here, someplace. There's no use hiding. You're only making it more difficult."

His heart hammering, Charles crouched among the bamboo. Here, debris and filth rotted. Weeds, garbage, papers, boxes, old clothing, boards, tin cans, bottles. Spiders and salamanders squirmed around him. The bamboo swayed with the night wind. Insects and filth.

And something else.

A shape, a silent, unmoving shape that grew up from the mound of filth like some nocturnal mushroom. A white column, a pulpy mass that glistened moistly in the moonlight. Webs covered it, a moldy cocoon. It had vague arms and legs. An indistinct half-shaped head. As yet, the features hadn't formed. But he could tell what it was.

A mother-thing. Growing here in the filth and dampness, between the garage and the house. Behind the towering bamboo.

It was almost ready. Another few days and it would reach maturity. It was still a larva, white and soft and pulpy. But the sun would dry and warm it. Harden its shell. Turn it dark and strong. It would emerge from its cocoon, and one day when his mother came by the garage… Behind the mother-thing were other pulpy white larvae, recently laid by the bug. Small. Just coming into existence. He could see where the father-thing had broken off; the place where it had grown. It had matured here. And in the garage, his father had met it.

Charles began to move numbly away, past the rotting boards, the filth and debris, the pulpy mushroom larvae. Weakly, he reached out to take hold of the fence — and scrambled back.

Another one. Another larvae. He hadn't seen this one, at first. It wasn't white. It had already turned dark. The web, the pulpy softness, the moistness, were gone. It was ready. It stirred a little, moved its arm feebly.

The Charles-thing.

The bamboo separated, and the father-thing's hand clamped firmly around the boy's wrist. "You stay right here," it said. "This is exactly the place for you. Don't move." With its other hand it tore at the remains of the cocoon binding the Charles-thing. "I'll help it out — it's still a little weak."

The last shred of moist gray was stripped back, and the Charles-thing tottered out. It floundered uncertainly, as the father-thing cleared a path for

it toward Charles.

“This way,” the father-thing grunted. “I’ll hold him for you. When you’ve fed you’ll be stronger.”

The Charles-thing’s mouth opened and closed. It reached greedily toward Charles. The boy struggled wildly, but the father-thing’s immense hand held him down.

“Stop that, young man,” the father-thing commanded. “It’ll be a lot easier for you if you —”

It screamed and convulsed. It let go of Charles and staggered back. Its body twitched violently. It crashed against the garage, limbs jerking. For a time it rolled and flopped in a dance of agony. It whimpered, moaned, tried to crawl away. Gradually it became quiet. The Charles-thing settled down in a silent heap. It lay stupidly among the bamboo and rotting debris, body slack, face empty and blank.

At last the father-thing ceased to stir. There was only the faint rustle of the bamboo in the night wind.

Charles got up awkwardly. He stepped down onto the cement driveway. Peretti and Daniels approached, wide-eyed and cautious. “Don’t go near it,” Daniels ordered sharply. “It ain’t dead yet. Takes a little while.”

“What did you do?” Charles muttered.

Daniels set down the drum of kerosene with a gasp of relief. “Found this in the garage. We Daniels always used kerosene on our mosquitoes, back in Virginia.”

“Daniels poured the kerosene down the bug’s tunnel,” Peretti explained, still awed. “It was his idea.”

Daniels kicked cautiously at the contorted body of the father-thing. “It’s dead, now. Died as soon as the bug died.”

“I guess the other’ll die, too,” Peretti said. He pushed aside the bamboo to examine the larvae growing here and there among the debris. The Charles-thing didn’t move at all, as Peretti jabbed the end of a stick into its chest. “This one’s dead.”

“We better make sure,” Daniels said grimly. He picked up the heavy drum of kerosene and lugged it to the edge of the bamboo. “It dropped some matches in the driveway. You get them, Peretti.”

They looked at each other.

“Sure,” Peretti said softly.

“We better turn on the hose,” Charles said. “To make sure it doesn’t spread.”

“Let’s get going,” Peretti said impatiently. He was already moving off. Charles quickly followed him and they began searching for the matches, in the moonlit darkness.

Strange Eden

Captain Johnson was the first man out of the ship. He scanned the planet's great rolling forests, its miles of green that made your eyes ache. The sky overhead that was pure blue. Off beyond the trees lapped the edges of an ocean, about the same color as the sky, except for a bubbling surface of incredibly bright seaweed that darkened the blue almost to purple.

He had only four feet to go from the control board to the automatic hatch, and from there down the ramp to the soft black soil dug up by the jet blast and strewn everywhere, still steaming. He shaded his eyes against the golden sun, and then, after a moment, removed his glasses and polished them on his sleeve. He was a small man, thin and sallow-faced. He blinked nervously without his glasses and quickly fitted them back in place. He took a deep breath of the warm air, held it in his lungs, let it roll through his system, then reluctantly let it escape.

"Not bad," Brent rumbled, from the open hatch.

"If this place were closer to Terra there'd be empty beer cans and plastic plates strewn around. The trees would be gone. There'd be old jet motors in the water. The beaches would stink to high heaven. Terran Development would have a couple of million little plastic houses set up everywhere."

Brent grunted indifferently. He jumped down, a huge barrel-chested man, sleeves rolled up, arms dark and hairy.

"What's that over there? Some kind of trail?"

Captain Johnson uneasily got out a star chart and studied it. "No ship ever reported this area, before us. According to this chart the whole system's uninhabited."

Brent laughed. “Ever occur to you there might already be culture here? Non-Terran?”

Captain Johnson fingered his gun. He had never used it; this was the first time he had been assigned to an exploring survey outside the patrolled area of the galaxy. “Maybe we ought to take off. Actually, we don’t have to map this place. We’ve mapped the three bigger planets, and this one isn’t really required.”

Brent strode across the damp ground, toward the trail. He squatted down and ran his hands over the broken grass. “Something comes along here. There’s a rut worn in the soil.” He gave a startled exclamation. “Footprints!”

“People?”

“Looks like some kind of animal. Large — maybe a big cat.” Brent straightened up, his heavy face thoughtful. “Maybe we could get ourselves some fresh game. And if not, maybe a little sport.”

Captain Johnson fluttered nervously. “How do we know what sort of defenses these animals have? Let’s play it safe and stay in the ship. We can make the survey by air; the usual processes ought to be enough for a little place like this. I hate to stick around here.” He shivered. “It gives me the creeps.”

“The creeps?” Brent yawned and stretched, then started along the trail, toward the rolling miles of green forest. “I like it. A regular national park — complete with wildlife. You stay in the ship. I’ll have a little fun.”

Brent moved cautiously through the dark woods, one hand on his gun. He was an old-time surveyor; he had wandered around plenty of remote places in his time, enough to know what he was doing. He halted from time to time, examining the trail and feeling the soil. The large prints continued and were joined by others. A whole group of animals had come along this

way, several species, all large. Probably flocking to a water source. A stream or pool of some kind.

He climbed a rise — then abruptly crouched. Ahead of him an animal was curled up on a flat stone, eyes shut, obviously sleeping. Brent moved around in a wide circle, carefully keeping his face to the animal. It was a cat, all right. But not the kind of cat he had ever seen before. Something like a lion — but larger. As large as a Terran rhino. Long tawny fur, great pads, a tail like a twisted spare-rope. A few flies crawled over its flanks; muscles rippled and the flies darted off. Its mouth was slightly open; he could see gleaming white fangs that sparkled moistly in the sun. A vast pink tongue. It breathed heavily, slowly, snoring in its slumber.

Brent toyed with his r-pistol. As a sportsman he couldn't shoot it sleeping: he'd have to chuck a rock at it and wake it up. But as a man looking at a beast twice his weight, he was tempted to blast its heart out and lug the remains back to the ship. The head would look fine; the whole damn pelt would look fine. He could make up a nice story to go along with it — the thing dropping on him from a branch, or maybe springing out of a thicket, roaring and snarling.

He knelt down, rested his right elbow on his right knee, clasped the butt of his pistol with his left hand, closed one eye, and carefully aimed. He took a deep breath, steadied the gun, and released the safety catch.

As he began squeezing the trigger, two more of the great cats sauntered past him along the trail, nosed briefly at their sleeping relation, and continued on into the brush.

Feeling foolish, Brent lowered his gun. The two beasts had paid no attention to him. One had glanced his way slightly, but neither had paused or taken any notice. He got unsteadily to his feet, cold sweat breaking out on his forehead. Good God, if they had wanted they could have torn him apart. Crouching there with his back turned —

He'd have to be more careful. Not stop and stay in one place. Keep moving, or go back to the ship. No, he wouldn't go back to the ship. He still

needed something to show pipsqueak Johnson. The little Captain was probably sitting nervously at the controls, wondering what had happened to him. Brent pushed carefully through the shrubs and regained the trail on the far side of the sleeping cat. He'd explore some more, find something worth bringing back, maybe camp the night in a sheltered spot. He had a pack of hard rations, and in an emergency he could raise Johnson with his throat transmitter.

He came out on a flat meadow. Flowers grew everywhere, yellow and red and violet blossoms; he strode rapidly through them. The planet was virgin — still in its primitive stage. No humans had come here; as Johnson said, in a while there'd be plastic plates and beer cans and rotting debris. Maybe he could take out a lease. Form a corporation and claim the whole damn thing. Then slowly subdivide, only to the best people. Promise them no commercialization; only the most exclusive homes. A garden retreat for wealthy Terrans who had plenty of leisure. Fishing and hunting: all the game they wanted. Completely tame, too. Unfamiliar with humans.

His scheme pleased him. As he came out of the meadow and plunged into dense trees, he considered how he'd raise the initial investment. He might have to cut others in on it; get somebody with plenty of loot to back him. They'd need good promotion and advertising; really push the thing good. Untouched planets were getting scarce; this might well be the last. If he missed this, it might be a long time before he had another chance to…

His thoughts died. His scheme collapsed. Dull resentment choked him and he came to an abrupt halt.

Ahead the trail broadened. The trees were farther apart; bright sunlight sifted down into the silent darkness of the ferns and bushes and flowers. On a little rise was a building. A stone house, with steps, a front porch, solid white walls like marble. A garden grew around it. Windows. A path. Smaller buildings in the back. All neat and pretty — and extremely modern-looking. A small fountain sprinkled blue water into a basin. A few birds moved around the gravel paths, pecking and scratching.

The planet was inhabited.

Brent approached warily. A wisp of gray smoke trailed out of the stone chimney. Behind the house were chicken pens, a cow-like thing dozing in the shade by its water trough. Other animals, some dog-like, and a group that might have been sheep. A regular little farm — but not like any farm he had seen. The buildings were of marble, or what looked like marble. And the animals were penned in by some kind of force-field. Everything was clean; in one corner a disposal tube sucked exhausted water and refuse into a half-buried tank.

He came to steps leading up to a back porch and, after a moment of thought, climbed them. He wasn't especially frightened. There was a serenity about the place, an orderly calm. It was hard to imagine any harm coming from it. He reached the door, hesitated, and then began looking for a knob.

There wasn't any knob. At his touch the door swung open. Feeling foolish, Brent entered. He found himself in a luxurious hall; recessed lights flickered on at the pressure of his boots on the thick carpets. Long glowing drapes hid the windows. Massive furniture — he peered into a room. Strange machines and objects. Pictures on the walls. Statues in the corners. He turned a corner and emerged into a large foyer. And still no one.

A huge animal, as large as a pony, moved out of a doorway, sniffed at him curiously, licked his wrist, and wandered off. He watched it go, heart in his mouth.

Tame. All the animals were tame. What kind of people had built this place? Panic stabbed at him. Maybe not people. Maybe some other race. Something alien, from beyond the galaxy. Maybe this was the frontier of an alien empire, some kind of advanced station.

While he was thinking about it, wondering if he should try to get out, run back to the ship, vid the cruiser station at Orion IX, there was a faint rustle behind him. He turned quickly, hand on his gun.

“Who —” he gasped. And froze.

A girl stood there, face calm, eyes large and dark, a cloudy black. She was tall, almost as tall as he, a little under six feet. Cascades of black hair spilled down her shoulders, down to her waist. She wore a glistening robe of some oddly-metallic material; countless facets glittered and sparkled and reflected the overhead lights. Her lips were deep red and full. Her arms were folded beneath her breasts; they stirred faintly as she breathed. Beside her stood the pony-like animal that had nosed him and gone on.

“Welcome, Mr. Brent,” the girl said. She smiled at him; he caught a flash of her tiny white teeth. Her voice was gentle and lilting, remarkably pure. Abruptly she turned; her robe fluttered behind her as she passed through the doorway and into the room beyond. “Come along. I’ve been expecting you.”

Brent entered cautiously. A man stood at the end of the long table, watching him with obvious dislike. He was huge, over six feet, broad shoulders and arms that rippled as he buttoned his cloak and moved toward the door. The table was covered with dishes and bowls of food; robot servants were clearing away the things silently. Obviously, the girl and man had been eating.

“This is my brother,” the girl said, indicating the dark-faced giant. He bowed slightly to Brent, exchanged a few words with the girl in an unfamiliar, liquid tongue, and then abruptly departed. His footsteps died down the hall.

“I’m sorry,” Brent muttered. “I didn’t mean to bust in here and break up anything.”

“Don’t worry. He was going. Actually, we don’t get along very well.” The girl drew the drapes aside to reveal a wide window overlooking the forest. “You can watch him go. His ship is parked out there. See it?”

It took a moment for Brent to make out the ship. It blended into the scenery perfectly. Only when it abruptly shot upward at a ninety-degree angle did he realize it had been there all the time. He had walked within yards of it.

“He’s quite a person,” the girl said, letting the drapes fall back in place. “Are you hungry? Here, sit down and eat with me. Now that Aeetes is gone and I’m all alone.”

Brent sat down cautiously. The food looked good. The dishes were some kind of semi-transparent metal. A robot set places in front of him, knives, forks, spoons, then waited to be instructed. The girl gave it orders in her strange liquid tongue. It promptly served Brent and retired.

He and the girl were alone. Brent began to eat greedily; the food was delicious. He tore the wings from a chicken-like fowl and gnawed at it expertly. He gulped down a tumbler of dark red wine, wiped his mouth on his sleeve, and attacked a bowl of ripe fruit. Vegetables, spiced meats, seafood, warm bread — he gobbled down everything with pleasure. The girl ate a few dainty bites; she watched him curiously, until finally he was finished and had pushed his empty dishes away.

“Where’s your Captain?” she asked. “Didn’t he come?”

“Johnson? He’s back at the ship.” Brent belched noisily. “How come you speak Terran? It’s not your natural language. And how did you know there’s somebody with me?”

The girl laughed, a tinkling musical peal. She wiped her slim hands on a napkin and drank from a dark red glass. “We watched you on the scanner. We were curious. This is the first time one of your ships has penetrated this far. We wondered what your intentions were.”

“You didn’t learn Terran by watching our ship on a scanner.”

“No. I learned your language from people of your race. That was a long time ago. I’ve spoken your language as long as I can remember.”

Brent was baffled. “But you said our ship was the first to come here.”

The girl laughed. “True. But we’ve often visited your little world. We know all about it. It’s a stop-over point when we travel in that direction. I’ve been there many times — not for a while, but in the old days when I traveled more.

A strange chill settled over Brent. “Who are you people? Where are you from?”

“I don’t know where we’re from originally,” the girl answered. “Our civilization is all over the universe, by now. It probably started from one place, back in legendary times. By now it’s practically everywhere.”

“Why haven’t we run into your people before?”

The girl smiled and continued eating. “Didn’t you hear what I said? You *have* met us. Often. We’ve even brought Terrans here. I remember one time very clearly, a few thousand years ago —”

“How long are your years?” Brent demanded.

“We don’t have years.” The girl’s dark eyes bored into him, luminous with amusement. “I mean *Terran* years.”

It took a minute for the full impact to hit him. “Thousand years,” he murmured. “You’ve been alive a thousand years?”

“Eleven thousand,” the girl answered simply. She nodded, and a robot cleared away the dishes. She leaned back in her chair, yawned, stretched like a small, lithe cat, then abruptly sprang to her feet. “Come on. We’ve finished eating. I’ll show you my house.”

Brent scrambled up and hurried after her, his confidence shattered. “You’re immortal, aren’t you?” He moved between her and the door, breathing rapidly, heavy face flushed. “You don’t age.”

“Age? No, of course not.”

Brent managed to find words. “You’re gods.”

The girl smiled up at him, dark eyes flashing merrily. “Not really. You have just about everything we have — almost as much knowledge, science, culture. Eventually you’ll catch up with us. We’re an old race. Millions of years ago our scientists succeeded in slowing down the processes of decay; since then we’ve ceased to die.”

“Then your race stays constant. None die, none are born.”

The girl pushed past him, through the doorway and down the hall. “Oh, people are born all the time. Our race grows and expands.” She halted at a doorway. “We haven’t given up any of our pleasures.” She eyed Brent thoughtfully, his shoulders, arms, his dark hair, heavy face. “We’re about like you, except that we’re eternal. You’ll probably solve that, too, sometime.”

“You’ve moved among us?” Brent demanded. He was beginning to understand. “Then all those old religions and myths were true. Gods. Miracles. You’ve had contact with us, given us things. Done things for us.” He followed her wonderingly into the room.

“Yes. I suppose we’ve done things for you. As we pass through.” The girl moved about the room, letting down massive drapes. Soft darkness fell over the couches and bookcases and statues. “Do you play chess?”

“CHESS?”

“It’s our national game. We introduced it to some of your Brahmin ancestors.” Disappointment showed on her sharp little face. “You don’t play? Too bad. What do you do? What about your companion? He looked as if his intellectual capacity was greater than yours. Does he play chess? Maybe you ought to go back and get him.”

“I don’t think so,” Brent said. He moved toward her. “As far as I know he doesn’t do anything.” He reached out and caught her by the arm. The girl pulled away, astonished. Brent gathered her up in his big arms and drew her tight against him. “I don’t think we need him,” he said.

He kissed her on the mouth. Her red lips were warm and sweet; she gasped and fought wildly. He could feel her slim body struggling against him. A cloud of fragrant scent billowed from her dark hair. She tore at him with her sharp nails, breasts heaving violently. He let go and she slid away, wary and bright-eyed, breathing quickly, body tense, drawing her luminous robe about her.

“I could kill you,” she whispered. She touched her jeweled belt. “You don’t understand, do you?”

Brent came forward. “You probably can. But I bet you won’t.”

She backed away from him. “Don’t be a fool.” Her red lips twisted and a smile flickered briefly. “You’re brave. But not very smart. Still, that’s not such a bad combination in a man. Stupid and brave.” Agilely, she avoided his grasp and slipped out of his reach. “You’re in good physical shape, too. How do you manage it aboard that little ship?”

“Quarterly fitness courses,” Brent answered. He moved between her and the door. “You must get pretty damn bored here, all by yourself. After the first few thousand years it must get trying.”

“I find things to do,” she said. “Don’t come any closer to me. As much as I admire your daring, it’s only fair to warn you that —”

Brent grabbed her. She fought wildly; he pinned her hands together behind her back with one paw, arched her body taut, and kissed her half-parted lips. She sank her tiny white teeth into him; he grunted and jerked away. She was laughing, black eyes dancing, as she struggled. Her breath came rapidly, cheeks flushed, half-covered breasts quivering, body twisting like a trapped animal. He caught her around the waist and grabbed her up in his arms.

A wave of force hit him.

He dropped her; she landed easily on her feet and danced back. Brent was doubled up, face gray with agony. Cold sweat stood out on his neck and hands. He sank down on a couch and closed his eyes, muscles knotted, body writhing with pain.

“Sorry,” the girl said. She moved around the room, ignoring him, “It’s your own fault — I told you to be careful. Maybe you better get out of here. Back to your little ship. I don’t want anything to happen to you. It’s against our policy to kill Terrans.”

“What — was that?”

“Nothing much. A form of repulsion, I suppose. This belt was constructed on one of our industrial planets; it protects me but I don’t know the operational principle.”

Brent manage to get to his feet. “You’re pretty tough for a little girl.”

“A little girl? I’m pretty *old* for a little girl. I was old before you were born. I was old before your people had rocket ships. I was old before you knew how to weave clothing and write your thoughts down with symbols. I’ve watched your race advance and fall back into barbarism and advance again. Endless nations and empires. I was alive when the Egyptians first began spreading out into Asia Minor. I saw the city builders of the Tigris Valley begin putting up their brick houses. I saw the Assyrian war chariots roll out to fight. I and my friends visited Greece and Rome and Minos and

Lydia and the great kingdoms of the red-skinned Indians. We were gods to the ancients, saints to the Christians. We come and go. As your people advanced we came less often. We have other way-stations; yours isn't the only stop-over point."

Brent was silent. Color was beginning to come back to his face. The girl had thrown herself down on one of the soft couches; she leaned back against a pillow and gazed up at him calmly, one arm outstretched, the other across her lap. Her long legs were tucked under her, tiny feet pressed together. She looked like a small, contented kitten resting after a game. It was hard for him to believe what she had told him. But his body still ached; he had felt a minute portion of her power-field, and it had almost killed him. That was something to think about.

"Well?" the girl asked, presently. "What are you going to do? It's getting late. I think you ought to go back to your ship. Your Captain will be wondering what happened to you."

Brent moved over to the window and drew aside the heavy drapes. The sun had set. Darkness was settling over the forests outside. Stars had already begun to come out, tiny dots of white in the thickening violet. A distant line of hills jutted up black and ominous.

"I can contact him," Brent said. He tapped at his neck. "In case of emergency. Tell him I'm all right."

"Are you all right? You shouldn't be here. You think you know what you're doing? You think you can handle me." She raised herself up slightly and tossed her black hair back over her shoulders. "I can see what's going on in your mind. I'm so much like a girl you had an affair with, a young brunette you used to wrap around your finger — and boast about to your companions."

Brent flushed. "You're a telepath. You should have told me."

“A partial telepath. All I need. Toss me your cigarettes. We don’t have such things.”

Brent fumbled in his pocket, got his pack out and tossed it to her. She lit up and inhaled gratefully. A cloud of gray smoke drifted around her; it mixed with the darkening shadows of the room. The corners dissolved into gloom. She became an indistinct shape, curled up on the couch, the glowing cigarette between her dark red lips.

“I’m not afraid,” Brent said.

“No, you’re not. You’re not a coward. If you were as smart as you are brave — but then I guess you wouldn’t be brave. I admire your bravery, stupid as it is. Man has a lot of courage. Even though it’s based on ignorance, it’s impressive.” After a moment, she said, “Come over here and sit with me.”

“What do I have to be worried about?” Brent asked after a while. “If you don’t turn on that damn belt, I’ll be all right.”

In the darkness, the girl stirred. “There’s more than that.” She sat up a little, arranged her hair, pulled a pillow behind her head. “You see, we’re of totally different races. My race is millions of years advanced over yours. Contact with us — close contact — is lethal. Not to us, of course. To you. You can’t be with me and remain a human being.”

“What do you mean?”

“You’ll undergo changes. Evolutionary changes. There’s pull which we exert. We’re fully charged; close contact with us will exert influence on the cells of your body. Those animals outside. They’ve evolved slightly; they’re no longer wild beasts. They’re able to understand simple commands and follow basic routines. As yet, they have no language. With such low animals it’s a long process; and my contact with them hasn’t really been close. But with you —”

“I see.”

“We’re not supposed to let humans near us. Aeetes cleared out of here. I’m too lazy to go — I don’t especially care. I’m not mature and responsible, I suppose.” She smiled slightly. “And my kind of close contact is a little closer than most.”

Brent could barely make out her slim form in the darkness. She lay back against the pillows, lips parted, arms folded beneath her breasts, head tilted back. She was lovely. The most beautiful woman he had ever seen. After a moment he leaned toward her. This time she didn’t move away. He kissed her gently. Then he put his arms around her slender body and drew her tight against him. Her robe rustled. Her soft hair brushed against him, warm and fragrant.

“It’s worth it,” he said.

“You’re sure? You can’t turn back, once it’s begun. Do you understand? You won’t be human any more. You’ll have evolved. Along lines your race will take millions of years from now. You’ll be an outcast, a forerunner of things to come. Without companions.”

“I’ll stay.” He caressed her cheek, her hair, her neck. He could feel the blood pulsing beneath the downy skin; a rapid pounding in the hollow of her throat. She was breathing rapidly; her breasts rose and fell against him. “If you’ll let me.”

“Yes,” she murmured. “I’ll let you. If it’s what you really want. But don’t blame me.” A half-sad, half-mischievous smile flitted across her sharp features; her dark eyes sparkled. “Promise you won’t blame me? It’s happened before — I hate people to reproach me. I always say never again. No matter what.”

“Has it happened before?”

The girl laughed, softly and close to his ear. She kissed him warmly and hugged him hard against her. “In eleven thousand years,” she whispered, “it’s happened quite often.”

Captain Johnson had a bad night. He tried to raise Brent on the emergency com, but there was no response. Only faint static and a distant echo of a vid program from Orion X. Jazz music and sugary commercials.

The sounds of civilization reminded him that they had to keep moving. Twenty-four hours was all the time allotted to this planet, smallest of its system.

“Damn,” he muttered. He fixed a pot of coffee and checked his wristwatch. Then he got out of the ship and wandered around in the early-morning sunlight. The sun was beginning to come up. The air turned from dark violet to gray. It was cold as hell. He shivered and stamped his feet and watched some small bird-like things fly down to peck around the bushes.

He was just beginning to think of notifying Orion XI when he saw her.

She walked quickly toward the ship. Tall and slim in a heavy fur jacket, her arms buried in the deep pelt. Johnson stood rooted to the spot, dumbfounded. He was too astonished even to touch his gun. His mouth fell open as the girl halted a little way off, tossed her dark hair back, blew a cloud of silvery breath at him and then said, “I’m sorry you had a bad night. It’s my fault. I should have sent him right back.”

Captain Johnson’s mouth opened and shut. “Who are you?” he managed finally. Fear seized him. “Where’s Brent? What happened?”

“He’ll be along.” She turned back toward the forest and made a sign. “I think you’d better leave, now. He wants to stay here and that is best — for he’s changed. He’ll be happy in my forest with the other — men. It’s strange how all you humans come out exactly alike. Your race is moving along an unusual path. It might be worth our while to study you, sometime.

It must have something to do with your low esthetic plateau. You seem to have an innate vulgarity, which eventually will dominate you.”

From out of the woods came a strange shape. For a moment, Captain Johnson thought his eyes were playing tricks on him. He blinked, squinted, then grunted in disbelief. Here, on this remote planet — but there was no mistake. It was definitely an immense cat-like beast that came slowly and miserably out of the woods after the girl.

The girl moved away, then halted to wave to the beast, who whined wretchedly around the ship.

Johnson stared at the animal and felt a sudden fear. Instinctively he knew that Brent was not coming back to the ship. Something had happened on this strange planet — that girl…

Johnson slammed the airlock shut and hurried to the control panel. He had to get back to the nearest base and make a report. This called for an elaborate investigation.

As the rockets blasted Johnson glanced through the viewplate. He saw the animal shaking a huge paw futilely in the air after the departing ship.

Johnson shuddered. That was too much like a man’s angry gesture…

Tony and the Beetles

Reddish-yellow sunlight filtered through the thick quartz windows into the sleep-compartment. Tony Rossi yawned, stirred a little, then opened his black eyes and sat up quickly. With one motion he tossed the covers back and slid to the warm metal floor. He clicked off his alarm clock and hurried to the closet.

It looked like a nice day. The landscape outside was motionless, undisturbed by winds or dust-shift. The boy's heart pounded excitedly. He pulled his trousers on, zipped up the reinforced mesh, struggled into his heavy canvas shirt, and then sat down onto the edge of the cot to tug on his boots. He closed the seams around their tops and then did the same with his gloves. Next he adjusted the pressure on his pump unit and strapped it between his shoulder blades. He grabbed his helmet from the dresser, and he was ready for the day.

In the dining-compartment his mother and father had finished breakfast. Their voices drifted to him as he clattered down the ramp. A disturbed murmur; he paused to listen. What were they talking about? Had he done something wrong, again?

And then he caught it. Behind their voices was another voice. Static and crackling pops. The all-system audio signal from Rigel IV. They had it turned up full blast; the dull thunder of the monitor's voice boomed loudly. The war. Always the war. He sighed, and stepped out into the dining-compartment.

"Morning," his father muttered.

"Good morning, dear," his mother said absently. She sat with her head turned to one side, wrinkles of concentration webbing her forehead. Her thin lips were drawn together in a tight line of concern. His father had pushed his dirty dishes back and was smoking, elbows on the table, dark

hairy arms bare and muscular. He was scowling, intent on the jumbled roar from the speaker above the sink.

"How's it going?" Tony asked. He slid into his chair and reached automatically for the ersatz grapefruit. "Any news from Orion?"

Neither of them answered. They didn't hear him. He began to eat his grapefruit. Outside, beyond the little metal and plastic housing unit, sounds of activity grew. Shouts and muffled crashes, as rural merchants and their trucks rumbled along the highway toward Karnet. The reddish daylight swelled; Betelgeuse was rising quietly and majestically.

"Nice day," Tony said. "No flux wind. I think I'll go down to the n-quarter awhile. We're building a neat spaceport, a model, of course, but we've been able to get enough materials to lay out strips for —"

With a savage snarl his father reached out and struck. The audio roar immediately died. "I knew it!" He got up and moved angrily away from the table. "I told them it would happen. They shouldn't have moved so soon. Should have built up Class A supply bases, first."

"Isn't our main fleet moving in from Bellatrix?" Tony's mother fluttered anxiously. "According to last night's summary the worse that can happen is Orion IX and X will be dumped."

Joseph Rossi laughed harshly. "The hell with last night's summary. They know as well as I do what's happening."

"What's happening?" Tony echoed, as he pushed aside his grapefruit and began to ladle out dry cereal. "Are we losing the battle?"

"Yes!" His father's lips twisted. "Earthmen, losing to — to *beetles.* I told them. But they couldn't wait. My God, there's ten good years left in this system. Why'd they have to push on? Everybody knew Orion would be

tough. The whole damn beetle fleet's strung out around there. Waiting for us. And we have to barge right in."

"But nobody ever thought beetles would fight," Leah Rossi protested mildly. "Everybody thought they'd just fire a few blasts and then —"

"They *have* to fight! Orion's the last jump-off. If they don't fight here, where the hell can they fight?" Rossi swore savagely. "Of course they're fighting. We have all their planets except the inner Orion string — not that they're worth much, but it's the principle of the thing. If we'd built up strong supply bases, we could have broken up the beetle fleet and really clobbered it."

"Don't say 'beetle'," Tony murmured, as he finished his cereal. "They're Pas-udeti, same as here. The word 'beetle' comes from Betelgeuse. An Arabian word we invented ourselves."

Joe Rossi's mouth opened and closed. "What are you, a goddamn beetle-lover?"

"Joe," Leah snapped. "For heaven's sake."

Rossi moved toward the door. "If I was ten years younger I'd be out there. I'd really show those shiny-shelled insects what the hell they're up against. Them and their junky beat-up old hulks. Converted freighters!" His eyes blazed. "When I think of them shooting down Terran cruisers with *our* boys in them —"

"Orion's their system," Tony murmured.

"*Their* system! When the hell did you get to be an authority on space law? Why, I ought to —" He broke off, choked with rage. "My own kid," he muttered. "One more crack out of you today and I'll hang one on you you'll feel the rest of the week."

Tony pushed his chair back. “I won’t be around today. I’m going into Karnet, with my EEP.”

“Yeah, to play with beetles!”

Tony said nothing. He was already sliding his helmet in place and snapping the clamps tight. As he pushed through the back door, into the lock membrane, he unscrewed his oxygen tap and set the tank filter into action. An automatic response, conditioned by a lifetime spent on a colony planet in an alien system.

A faint flux wind caught at him and swept yellow-red dust around his boots. Sunlight glittered from the metal roof of his family’s housing unit, one of endless rows of squat boxes set in the sandy slope, protected by the line of ore-refining installations against the horizon. He made an impatient signal, and from the storage shed his EEP came gliding out, catching the sunlight on its chrome trim.

“We’re going down into Karnet,” Tony said, unconsciously slipping into the Pas dialect. “Hurry up!”

The EEP took up its position behind him, and he started briskly down the slope, over the shifting sand, toward the road. There were quite a few traders out, today. It was a good day for the market; only a fourth of the year was fit for travel. Betelgeuse was an erratic and undependable sun, not at all like Sol (according to the edutapes fed to Tony four hours a day, six days a week — he had never seen Sol himself).

He reached the noisy road. Pas-udeti were everywhere. Whole groups of them, with their primitive combustion-driven trucks, battered and filthy, motors grinding protestingly. He waved at the trucks as they pushed past him. After a moment one slowed down. It was piled with *tis*, bundled heaps of gray vegetables, dried and prepared for the table. A staple of the Pas-udeti diet. Behind the wheel lounged a dark-faced elderly Pas, one arm over the open window, a rolled leaf between his lips. He was like all other Pas-

udeti: lank and hard-shelled, encased in a brittle sheath in which he lived and died.

"You want a ride?" the Pas murmured — required protocol when an Earthman on foot was encountered.

"Is there room for my EEP?"

The Pas made a careless motion with his claw. "It can run behind." Sardonic amusement touched his ugly old face. "If it gets to Karnet we'll sell it for scrap. We can use a few condensers and relay tubing. We're short of electronic maintenance stuff."

"I know," Tony said solemnly, as he climbed into the cabin of the truck. "It's all been sent to the big repair base at Orion I. For your warfleet."

Amusement vanished from the leathery face. "Yes, the warfleet." He turned away and started up the truck again. In the back, Tony's EEP had scrambled up on the load of *tis* and was gripping precariously with its magnetic lines.

Tony noticed the Pas-udeti's sudden change of expression, and he was puzzled. He started to speak to him — but now he noticed unusual quietness among the other Pas, in the other trucks, behind and in front of his own. The war, of course. It had swept through this system a century ago; these people had been left behind. Now all eyes were on Orion, on the battle between the Terran warfleet and the Pas-udeti collection of armed freighters.

"Is it true," Tony asked carefully, "that you're winning?"

The elderly Pas grunted. "We hear rumors."

Tony considered. “My father says Terra went ahead too fast. He says we should have consolidated. We didn’t assemble adequate supply bases. He used to be an officer, when he was younger. He was with the fleet for two years.”

The Pas was silent a moment. “It’s true,” he said at last, “that when you’re so far from home, supply is a great problem. We, on the other hand, don’t have that. We have no distances to cover.”

“Do you know anybody fighting?”

“I have distant relatives.” The answer was vague; the Pas obviously didn’t want to talk about it.

“Have you ever seen your warfleet?”

“Not as it exists now. When this system was defeated most of our units were wiped out. Remnants limped to Orion and joined the Orion fleet.”

“Your relatives were with the remnants?”

“That’s right.”

“Then you were alive when this planet was taken?”

“Why do you ask?” The old Pas quivered violently. “What business is it of yours?”

Tony leaned out and watched the walls and buildings of Karnet grow ahead of them. Karnet was an old city. It had stood thousands of years. The Pas-udeti civilization was stable; it had reached a certain point of technocratic development and then leveled off. The Pas had intersystem ships that had carried people and freight between planets in the days before the Terran Confederation. They had combustion-driven cars, audiophones, a power network of a magnetic type. Their plumbing was satisfactory and

their medicine was highly advanced. They had art forms, emotional and exciting. They had a vague religion.

“Who do you think will win the battle?” Tony asked.

“I don’t know.” With a sudden jerk the old Pas brought the truck to a crashing halt. “This is as far as I go. Please get out and take your EEP with you.”

Tony faltered in surprise. “But aren’t you going —?”

“No farther!”

Tony pushed the door open. He was vaguely uneasy; there was a hard, fixed expression on the leathery face, and the old creature’s voice had a sharp edge he had never heard before. “Thanks,” he murmured. He hopped down into the red dust and signaled his EEP. It released it magnetic lines, and instantly the truck started up with a roar, passing on inside the city.

Tony watched it go, still dazed. The hot dust lapped at his ankles; he automatically moved his feet and slapped at his trousers. A truck honked, and his EEP quickly moved him from the road, up to the level pedestrian ramp. Pas-udeti in swarms moved by, endless lines of rural people hurrying into Karnet on their daily business. A massive public bus had stopped by the gate and was letting off passengers. Male and female Pas. And children. They laughed and shouted; the sounds of their voices blended with the low hum of the city.

“Going in?” a sharp Pas-udeti voice sounded close behind him. “Keep moving — you’re blocking the ramp.”

It was a young female, with a heavy armload clutched in her claws. Tony felt embarrassed; female Pas had a certain telepathic ability, part of their sexual makeup. It was effective on Earthmen at close range.

“Here,” she said. “Give me a hand.”

Tony nodded his head, and the EEP accepted the female’s heavy armload. “I’m visiting the city,” Tony said, as they moved with the crowd toward the gates. “I got a ride most of the way, but the driver let me off out here.”

“You’re from the settlement?”

“Yes.”

She eyed him critically. “You’ve always lived here, haven’t you?”

“I was born here. My family came here from Earth four years before I was born. My father was an officer in the fleet. He earned an Emigration Priority.”

“So you’ve never seen your own planet. How old are you?”

“Ten years. Terran.”

“You shouldn’t have asked the driver so many questions.”

They passed through the decontamination shield and into the city. An information square loomed ahead; Pas men and women were packed around it. Moving chutes and transport cars rumbled everywhere. Buildings and ramps and open-air machinery; the city was sealed in a protective dust-proof envelope. Tony unfastened his helmet and clipped it to his belt. The air was stale-smelling, artificial, but usable.

“Let me tell you something,” the young female said carefully, as she strode along the foot-ramp beside Tony. “I wonder if this is a good day for you to come to Karnet. I know you’ve been coming here regularly to play with your friends. But perhaps today you ought to stay home, in your settlement.”

“Why?”

“Because today everybody is upset.”

“I know,” Tony said. “My mother and father were upset. They were listening to the news from our base in the Rigel system.”

“I don’t mean your family. Other people are listening, too. These people here. My race.”

“They’re upset, all right,” Tony admitted. “But I come here all the time. There’s nobody to play with at the settlement, and anyhow we’re working on a project.”

“A model spaceport.”

“That’s right.” Tony was envious. “I sure wish I was a telepath. It must be fun.”

The female Pas-udeti was silent. She was deep in thought. “What would happen,” she asked, “if your family left here and returned to Earth?”

“That couldn’t happen. There’s no room for us on Earth. C-bombs destroyed most of Asia and North America back in the Twentieth Century.”

“Suppose you *had to* go back?”

Tony did not understand. “But we can’t. Habitable portions of Earth are overcrowded. Our main problem is finding places for Terrans to live, in other systems.” He added, “And anyhow, I don’t particularly want to go to Terra. I’m used to it here. All my friends are here.”

“I’ll take my packages,” the female said. “I go this other way, down this third-level ramp.”

Tony nodded to his EEP and it lowered the bundles into the female's claws. She lingered a moment, trying to find the right words.

"Good luck," she said.

"With what?"

She smiled faintly, ironically. "With your model spaceport. I hope you and your friends get to finish it."

"Of course we'll finish it," Tony said, surprised. "It's almost done." What did she mean?

The Pas-udeti woman hurried off before he could ask her. Tony was troubled and uncertain; more doubts filled him. After a moment he headed slowly into the lane that took him toward the residential section of the city. Past the stores and factories, to the place where his friends lived.

The group of Pas-udeti children eyed him silently as he approached. They had been playing in the shade of an immense *bengelo,* whose ancient branches drooped and swayed with the air currents pumped through the city. Now they sat unmoving.

"I didn't expect you today," B'prith said, in an expressionless voice.

Tony halted awkwardly, and his EEP did the same. "How are things?" he murmured.

"Fine."

"I got a ride part way."

"Fine."

Tony squatted down in the shade. None of the Pas children stirred. They were small, not as large as Terran children. Their shells had not hardened, had not turned dark and opaque, like horn. It gave them a soft, unformed appearance, but at the same time it lightened their load. They moved more easily than their elders: they could hop and skip around, still. But they were not skipping right now.

“What’s the matter?” Tony demanded. “What’s wrong with everybody?”

No one answered.

“Where’s the model?” he asked. “Have you fellows been working on it?”

After a moment Llyre nodded slightly.

Tony felt dull anger rise up inside him. “Say something! What’s the matter? What’re you all mad about?”

“Mad?” B’prith echoed. “We’re not mad.”

Tony scratched aimlessly in the dust. He knew what it was. The war, again. The battle going on near Orion. His anger burst up wildly. “Forget the war. Everything was fine yesterday, before the battle.”

“Sure,” Llyre said. “It was fine.”

Tony caught the edge to his voice. “It happened a hundred years ago. It’s not my fault.”

“Sure,” B’prith said.

“This is my home. Isn’t it? Haven’t I got as much right here as anybody else? I was born here.”

“Sure,” Llyre said, tonelessly.

Tony appealed to them helplessly. “Do you have to act this way? You didn’t act this way yesterday. I was here yesterday — all of us were here yesterday. What’s happened since yesterday?”

“The battle,” B’prith said.

“What difference does *that* make? Why does that change everything? There’s always war. There’ve been battles all the time, as long as I can remember. What’s different about this?”

B’prith broke apart a clump of dirt with his strong claws. After a moment he tossed it away and got slowly to his feet. “Well,” he said thoughtfully, “according to our audio relay, it looks as if our fleet is going to win, this time.”

“Yes,” Tony agreed, not understanding. “My father says we didn’t build up adequate supply bases. We’ll probably have to fall back to…” And then the impact hit him. ‘You mean, for the first time in a hundred years —”

“Yes,” Llyre said, also getting up. The others got up, too. They moved away from Tony, toward the nearby house. “We’re winning. The Terran flank was turned, half an hour ago. Your right wing has folded completely.”

Tony was stunned. “And it matters. It matters to all of you.”

“Matters!” B’prith halted, suddenly blazing out in fury. “Sure it matters! For the first time — in a century. The first time in our lives we’re beating you. We have you on the run, you —” He choked out the word, almost spat it out. “You white-grubs!”

They disappeared into the house. Tony sat gazing stupidly down at the ground, his hands still moving aimlessly. He had heard the word before,

seen it scrawled on walls and in the dust near the settlement. *White-grubs.* The Pas term of derision for Terrans. Because of their softness, their whiteness. Lack of hard shells. Pulpy, doughy skin. But they had never dared say it out loud, before. To an Earthman's face.

Beside him, his EEP stirred restlessly. Its intricate radio mechanism sensed the hostile atmosphere. Automatic relays were sliding into place; circuits were opening and closing.

"It's all right," Tony murmured, getting slowly up. "Maybe we'd better go back."

He moved unsteadily toward the ramp, completely shaken. The EEP walked calmly ahead, its metal face blank and confident, feeling nothing, saying nothing. Tony's thoughts were a wild turmoil; he shook his head, but the crazy spinning kept up. He couldn't make his mind slow down, lock in place.

"Wait a minute," a voice said. B'prith's voice, from the open doorway. Cold and withdrawn, almost unfamiliar.

"What do you want?"

B'prith came toward him, claws behind his back in the formal Pas-udeti posture, used between total strangers. "You shouldn't have come here, today."

"I know," Tony said.

B'prith got out a bit of *tis* stalk and began to roll it into a tube. He pretended to concentrate on it. "Look," he said. "You said you have a right here. But you don't."

"I —" Tony murmured.

“Do you understand why not? You said it isn’t your fault. I guess not. But it’s not my fault, either. Maybe it’s nobody’s fault. I’ve known you a long time.”

“Five years. Terran.”

B’prith twisted the stalk up and tossed it away. “Yesterday we played together. We worked on the spaceport. But we can’t play today. My family said to tell you not to come here any more.” He hesitated, and did not look Tony in the face. “I was going to tell you, anyhow. Before they said anything.”

“Oh,” Tony said.

“Everything that’s happened today — the battle, our fleet’s stand. We didn’t know. We didn’t dare hope. You see? A century of running. First this system. Then the Rigel system, all the planets. Then the other Orion stars. We fought here and there — scattered fights. Those that got away joined up. We supplied the base at Orion — you people didn’t know. But there was no hope; at least, nobody thought there was.” He was silent a moment. “Funny,” he said, “what happens when your back’s to the wall, and there isn’t any further place to go. Then you have to fight.”

“If our supply bases —” Tony began thickly, but B’prith cut him off savagely.

“Your supply bases! Don’t you understand? We’re beating you! Now you’ll have to get out! All you white-grubs. Out of our system!”

Tony’s EEP moved forward ominously. B’prith saw it. He bent down, snatched up a rock, and hurled to straight at the EEP. The rock clanged off the metal hull and bounced harmlessly away. B’prith snatched up another rock. Llyre and the others came quickly out of the house. An adult Pas loomed up behind them. Everything was happening too fast. More rocks crashed against the EEP. One struck Tony on the arm.

“Get out!” B’prith screamed. “Don’t come back! This is our planet!” His claws snatched at Tony. “We’ll tear you to pieces if you —”

Tony smashed him in the chest. The soft shell gave like rubber, and the Pas stumbled back. He wobbled and fell over, gasping and screeching.

“Beetle,” Tony breathed hoarsely. Suddenly he was terrified. A crowd of Pas-udeti was forming rapidly. They surged on all sides, hostile faces, dark and angry, a rising thunder of rage.

More stones showered. Some struck the EEP, others fell around Tony, near his boots. One whizzed past his face. Quickly he slid his helmet in place. He was scared. He knew his EEP’s Esignal had already gone out, but it would be minutes before a ship could come. Besides, there were other Earthmen in the city to be taken care of; there were Earthmen all over the planet. In all the cities. On all the twenty-three Betelgeuse planets. On the fourteen Rigel planets. On the other Orion planets.

“We have to get out of here,” he muttered to the EEP. “Do something!”

A stone hit him on the helmet. The plastic cracked; air leaked out, and then the autoseal filmed over. More stones were falling. The Pas swarmed close, a yelling, seething mass of black-sheathed creatures. He could smell them, the acrid body-odor of insects, hear their claws snap, feel their weight.

The EEP threw its heat beam on. The beam shifted in a wide band toward the crowd of Pas-udeti. Crude hand weapons appeared. A clatter of bullets burst around Tony; they were firing at the EEP. He was dimly aware of the metal body beside him. A shuddering crash — the EEP was toppled over. The crowd poured over it; the metal hull was lost from sight.

Like a demented animal, the crowd tore at the struggling EEP. A few of them smashed in its head; others tore off struts and shiny arm-sections. The

EEP ceased struggling. The crowd moved away, panting and clutching jagged remains. They saw Tony.

As the first line of them reached for him, the protective envelope high above them shattered. A Terran scout ship thundered down, heat beam screaming. The crowd scattered in confusion, some firing, some throwing stones, others leaping for safety.

Tony picked himself up and made his way unsteadily toward the spot where the scout was landing.

“I’m sorry,” Joe Rossi said gently. He touched his son on the shoulder. “I shouldn’t have let you go down there today. I should have known.”

Tony sat hunched over in the big plastic easychair. He rocked back and forth, face pale with shock. The scout ship which had rescued him had immediately headed back toward Karnet; there were other Earthmen to bring out, besides this first load. The boy said nothing. His mind was blank. He still heard the roar of the crowd, felt its hate — a century of pent-up fury and resentment. The memory drove out everything else; it was all around him, even now. And the sight of the floundering EEP, the metallic ripping sound, as its arms and legs were torn off and carried away.

His mother dabbed at his cuts and scratches with antiseptic. Joe Rossi shakily lit a cigarette and said, “If your EEP hadn’t been along they’d have killed you. Beetles.” He shuddered. “I never should have let you go down there. All this time… They might have done it any time, any day. Knifed you. Cut you open with their filthy goddamn claws.”

Below the settlement the reddish-yellow sunlight glinted on gunbarrels. Already, dull booms echoed against the crumbling hills. The defense ring was going into action. Black shapes darted and scurried up the side of the slope. Black patches moved out from Karnet, toward the Terran settlement, across the dividing line the Confederation surveyors had set up a century ago. Karnet was a bubbling pot of activity. The whole city rumbled with feverish excitement.

Tony raised his head. “They — they turned our flank.”

“Yeah.” Joe Rossi stubbed out his cigarette. “They sure did. That was at one o’clock. At two they drove a wedge right through the center of our line. Split the fleet in half. Broke it up — sent it running. Picked us off one by one as we fell back. Christ, they’re like maniacs. Now that they’ve got the scent, the taste of our blood.”

“But it’s getting better,” Leah fluttered. “Our main fleet units are beginning to appear.”

“We’ll get them,” Joe muttered. “It’ll take a while. But by God we’ll wipe them out. Every last one of them. If it takes a thousand years. We’ll follow every last ship down — we’ll get them all.” His voice rose in frenzy. “Beetles! Goddamn insects! When I think of them, trying to hurt my kid, with their filthy black claws —”

“If you were younger, you’d be in the line,” Leah said. “It’s not your fault you’re too old. The heart strain’s too great. You did your job. They can’t let an older person take chances. It’s not your fault.”

Joe clenched his fists. “I feel so — futile. If there was only something I could do.”

“The fleet will take care of them,” Leah said soothingly. “You said so yourself. They’ll hunt every one of them down. Destroy them all. There’s nothing to worry about.”

Joe sagged miserably. “It’s no use. Let’s cut it out. Let’s stop kidding ourselves.”

“What do you mean?”

“Face it! We’re not going to win, not this time. We went too far. Our time’s come.”

There was silence.

Tony sat up a little. “When did you know?”

“I’ve known a long time.”

“I found out today. I didn’t understand, at first. This is — stolen ground. I was born here, but it’s stolen ground.”

“Yes. It’s stolen. It doesn’t belong to us.”

“We’re here because we’re stronger. But now we’re not stronger. We’re being beaten.”

“They know Terrans can be licked. Like anybody else.” Joe Rossi’s face was gray and flabby. “We took their planets away from them. Now they’re taking them back. It’ll be a while, of course. We’ll retreat slowly. It’ll be another five centuries going back. There’re a lot of systems between here and Sol.”

Tony shook his head, still uncomprehending. “Even Llyre and B’prith. All of them. Waiting for their time to come. For us to lose and go away again. Where we came from.”

Joe Rossi paced back and forth. “Yeah, we’ll be retreating from now on. Giving ground, instead of taking it. It’ll be like this today — losing fights, draws. Stalemates and worse.”

He raised his feverish eyes toward the ceiling of the little metal housing unit, face wild with passion and misery.

“But, by God, we’ll give them a run for their money. All the way back! Every inch!”

Null-O

Lemuel clung to the wall of his dark bedroom, tense, listening. A faint breeze stirred the lace curtains. Yellow street-light filtered over the bed, the dresser, the books and toys and clothes.

In the next room, two voices were murmuring together. “Jean, we’ve got to do something,” the man’s voice said.

A strangled gasp. “Ralph, please don’t hurt him. You must control yourself. I won’t let you hurt him.”

“I’m not going to hurt him.” There was brute anguish in the man’s whisper. “Why does he do these things? Why doesn’t he play baseball and tag like normal boys? Why does he have to burn down stores and torture helpless animals? *Why?”*

“He’s different, Ralph. We must try to understand.”

“Maybe we better take him to the doctor,” his father said. “Maybe he’s got some kind of glandular disease.”

“You mean old Doc Grady? But you said he couldn’t find —”

“Not Doc Grady. He quit after Lemuel destroyed his X-ray equipment and smashed all the furniture in his office. No, this is bigger than that.” A tense pause. “Jean, I’m taking him up to the Hill.”

“Oh, Ralph! Please —”

“I mean it.” Grim determination, the harsh growl of a trapped animal. “Those psychologists may be able to do something. Maybe they can help him. Maybe not.”

“But they might not let us have him back. And oh, Ralph, he’s all we’ve got!”

“Sure,” Ralph muttered hoarsely. “I know he is. But I’ve made up my mind. That day he slashed his teacher with a knife and leaped out the window. That day I made up my mind. Lemuel is going up to the Hill.”

The day was warm and bright. Between the swaying trees the huge white hospital sparkled, all concrete and steel and plastic. Ralph Jorgenson peered about uncertainly, hat twisted between his fingers, subdued by the immensity of the place.

Lemuel listened intently. Straining his big, mobile ears, he could hear many voices, a shifting sea of voices that surged around him. The voices came from all the rooms and offices, on all the levels. They excited him.

Dr. James North came toward them, holding out his hand. He was tall and handsome, perhaps thirty, with brown hair and black horn-rimmed glasses. His stride was firm, his grip, when he shook hands with Lemuel, brief and confident. “Come in here,” he boomed. Ralph moved toward the office, but Dr. North shook his head. “Not you. The boy. Lemuel and I are going to have a talk alone.”

Excited, Lemuel followed Dr. North into his office. North quickly secured the door with triple magnetic locks. “You can call me James,” he said, smiling warmly at the boy. “And I’ll call you Lem, right?”

“Sure,” Lemuel said guardedly. He felt no hostility emanating from the man, but he had learned to keep his guard up. He had to be careful, even with this friendly, good-looking doctor, a man of obvious intellectual ability.

North lit a cigarette and studied the boy. “When you tied up and dissected those old derelicts,” he said thoughtfully, “you were scientifically

curious, weren't you? You wanted to *know* -- facts, not opinions. You wanted to find out for yourself how human beings were constructed."

Lemuel's excitement grew. "But no one understood."

"No." North shook his head. "No, they wouldn't. Do you know why?"

"I think so."

North paced back and forth. "I'll give you a few tests. To find out things. You don't mind, do you? We'll both learn more about you. I've been studying you, Lem. I've examined the police records and the newspaper files." Abruptly, he opened the drawer of his desk and got out the Minnesota Multiphasic, the Rorschach blots, the Bender Gestalt, the Rhine deck of ESP cards, an ouija board, a pair of dice, a magic writing tablet, a wax doll with fingernail parings and bits of hair, and a small piece of lead to be turned into gold.

"What do you want me to do?" Lemuel asked.

"I'm going to ask you a few questions, and give you a few objects to play with. I'll watch your reactions, note down a few things. How's that sound?"

Lemuel hesitated. He needed a friend so badly — but he was afraid.

Dr. North put his hand on the boy's shoulder. "You can trust me. I'm not like those kids that beat you up, that morning."

Lemuel glanced up gratefully. "You know about that? I discovered the rules of their game were purely arbitrary. Therefore I naturally oriented myself to the basic reality of the situation, and when I came up at bat I hit the pitcher and the catcher over the head. Later I discovered that all human ethics and morals are exactly the same sort of —" He broke off, suddenly afraid. "Maybe I —"

Dr. North sat down behind his desk and began shuffling the Rhine ESP deck. “Don’t worry, Lem,” he said softly. “Everything will be all right. I understand.”

After the tests, the two of them sat in silence. It was six o’clock, and the sun was beginning to set outside. At last Dr. North spoke.

“Incredible. I can scarcely believe it, myself. You’re utterly logical. You’ve completely cast off all thalamic emotion. Your mind is totally free of moral and cultural bias. You’re a perfect paranoid, without any empathic ability whatever. You’re utterly incapable of feeling sorrow or pity or compassion, or *any* of the normal human emotions.”

Lemuel nodded. “True.”

Dr. North leaned back, dazed. “It’s hard even for me to grasp this. It’s overwhelming. You possess super-logic, completely free of value-orientation bias. And you conceive of the entire world as organized against you.”

“Yes.”

“Of course. You’ve analyzed the structure of human activity and seen that as soon as they find out, they’ll pounce on you and try to destroy you.”

“Because I’m different.”

North was overcome. “They’ve always classed paranoia as a mental illness. But it isn’t! There’s no lack of contact with reality — on the contrary, the paranoid is *directly* related to reality. He’s a perfect empiricist. Not cluttered with ethical and moral-cultural inhibitions. The paranoid sees things as they really are; he’s actually the only sane man.”

“I’ve been reading *Mein Kampf,*” Lemuel said. “It shows me I’m not alone.” And in his mind he breathed the silent prayer of thanks: *Not alone.* Us. There are more of us.

Dr. North caught his expression. “The wave of the future,” he said. “I’m not a part of it, but I can try to understand. I can appreciate I’m just a human being, limited by my thalamic emotional and cultural bias. I can’t be one of you, but I can sympathize…” He looked up, face alight with enthusiasm. “And I can help!”

The next few days were filled with excitement for Lemuel. Dr. North arranged for custody of him, and the boy took up residence at the doctor’s uptown apartment. Here, he was no longer under pressure from his family; he could do as he pleased. Dr. North began at once to aid Lemuel in locating other mutant paranoids.

One evening after dinner, Dr. North asked, “Lemuel, do you think you could explain your theory of Null-O to me? It’s hard to grasp the principle of non-object orientation.”

Lemuel indicated the apartment with a wave of his hand. “All these apparent objects — each has a name. Book, chair, couch, rug, lamp, drapes, window, door, wall, and so on. But this division into objects is purely artificial. Based on an antiquated system of thought. In reality there are no objects. The universe is actually a unity. We have been taught to think in terms of objects. This *thing*, that *thing.* When Null-O is realized, this purely verbal division will cease. It has long since outlived its usefulness.”

“Can you give me an example, a demonstration?”

Lemuel hesitated. “It’s hard to do alone. Later on, when we’ve contacted others… I can do it crudely, on a small scale.”

As Dr. North watched intently, Lemuel rushed about the apartment gathering everything together in a heap. Then, when all the books, pictures,

rugs, drapes, furniture and bric-a-brac had been collected, he systematically smashed everything into a shapeless mass.

“You see,” he said, exhausted and pale from the violent effort, “the distinction into arbitrary objects is now gone. This unification of things into their basic homogeneity can be applied to the universe as a whole. The universe is a gestalt, a unified substance, without division into living and non-living, being and non-being. A vast vortex of energy, not discrete particles! Underlying the purely artificial appearance of material objects lies the world of reality: a vast undifferentiated realm of pure energy. Remember: the object is not the reality. First law of Null-O thought!”

Dr. North was solemn, deeply impressed. He kicked at a bit of broken chair, part of the shapeless heap of wood and cloth and paper and shattered glass. “Do you think this restoration to reality can be accomplished?”

“I don’t know,” Lemuel said simply. “There will be opposition, of course. Human beings will fight us; they’re incapable of rising above their monkey-like preoccupation with *things* — bright objects they can touch and possess. It will all depend on how well we can coordinate with each other.”

Dr. North unfolded a slip of paper from his pocket. “I have a lead,” he said quietly. “The name of a man I think is one of you. We’ll visit him tomorrow — then we’ll see.”

Dr. Jacob Weller greeted them with brisk efficiency at the entrance of his well-guarded lab overlooking Palo Alto. Rows of uniformed government guards protected the vital work he was doing, the immense system of labs and research offices. Men and women in white robes were working day and night.

“My work,” he explained, as he signaled for the heavy-duty entrance locks to be closed behind them, “was basic in the development of the C-bomb, the cobalt case for the H-bomb. You will find that many top nuclear physicists are Null-O.”

Lemuel’s breath caught. “Then —”

“Of course.” Weller wasted no words. “We’ve been working for years. Rockets at Peenemunde, the A-bomb at Los Alamos, the hydrogen bomb, and now this, the C-bomb. There are, of course, many scientists who are not Null-O, regular human beings with thalamic bias. Einstein, for example. But we’re well on the way; unless too much opposition is encountered we’ll be able to go into action very shortly.”

The rear door of the laboratory slid aside, and a group of white-clad men and women filed solemnly in. Lemuel’s heart gave a jump. Here they were, full-fledged adult Null-O’s! Men and women both, *and they had been working for years!* He recognized them easily; all had the elongated and mobile ears, by which the mutant Null-O picked up minute air vibrations over great distances. It enabled them to communicate, wherever they were, throughout the world.

“Explain our program,” Weller said to a small blond man who stood beside him, calm and collected, face stern with the importance of the moment.

“The C-bomb is almost ready,” the man said quietly, with a slight German accent. “But it is not the final step in our plans. There is also the E-bomb, which is the ultimate of this initial phase. We have never made the E-bomb public. If human beings should find out about it, we should have to cope with serious emotional opposition.”

“What is the E-bomb?” Lemuel asked, glowing with excitement.

“The phrase, ‘the E-bomb,’ ” said the small blond man, “describes the process by which the Earth itself becomes a pile, is brought up to critical mass, and then allowed to detonate.”

Lemuel was overcome. “I had no idea you had developed the plan this far!”

The blond man smiled faintly. “Yes, we have done a lot, since the early days. Under Dr. Rust, I was able to work out the basic ideological concepts of our program. Ultimately, we will unify the entire universe into a homogeneous mass. Right now, however, our concern is with the Earth. But once we have been successful here, there’s no reason why we can’t continue our work indefinitely.”

“Transportation,” Weller explained, “has been arranged to other planets. Dr.Frischhere —”

“A modification of the guided missiles we developed at Peenemunde,” the blond man continued. “We have constructed a ship which will take us to Venus. There, we will initiate the second phase of our work. A V-bomb will be developed, which will restore Venus to its primordial state of homogeneous energy. And then —” He smiled faintly. “And then an S-bomb. The Sol bomb. Which will, if we are successful, unify this whole system of planets and moons into a vast gestalt.”

By June 25, 1969, Null-O personnel had gained virtual control of all major world governments. The process, begun in the middle thirties, was for all practical purposes complete. The United States and Soviet Russia were firmly in the hands of Null-O individuals. Null-O men controlled all policy-level positions, and hence, could speed up the program of Null-O. The time had come. Secrecy was no longer necessary.

Lemuel and Dr. North watched from a circling rocket as the first H-bombs were detonated. By careful arrangement, both nations began H-bomb attacks simultaneously. Within an hour, class-one results were obtained; most of North America and Eastern Europe were gone. Vast clouds of radioactive particles drifted and billowed. Fused pits of metal bubbled and sputtered as far as the eye could see. In Africa, Asia, on endless islands and out-of-the-way places, surviving human beings cowered in terror.

“Perfect,” came Dr. Weller’s voice in Lemuel’s ears. He was somewhere below the surface, down in the carefully protected headquarters where the Venus ship was in its last stages of assembly.

Lemuel agreed. “Great work. We’ve managed to unify at least a fifth of the world’s land surface!”

“But there’s more to come. Next the C-bombs are to be released. This will prevent human beings from interfering with our final work, the E-bomb installations. The terminals must still be erected. That can’t be done as long as humans remain to interfere.”

Within a week, the first C-bomb was set off. More followed, hurtled up from carefully concealed launchers in Russia and America.

By August 5, 1969, the human population of the world had been diminished to three thousand. The Null-O’s, in their subsurface offices, glowed with satisfaction. Unification was proceeding exactly as planned. The dream was coming true.

“Now,” said Dr. Weller, “we can begin erection of the E-bomb terminals.”

One terminal was begun at Arequipa, Peru. The other, at the opposite side of the globe, at Bandoeng, Java. Within a month the two immense towers rose high against the dust-swept sky. In heavy protective suits and helmets, the two colonies of Null-O’s worked day and night to complete the program.

Dr. Weller flew Lemuel to the Peruvian installation. All the way from San Francisco to Lima there was nothing but rolling ash and still-burning metallic fires. No sign of life or separate entities: everything had been fused into a single mass of heaving slag. The oceans themselves were steam and boiling water. All distinction between land and sea had been lost. The surface of the Earth was a single expanse of dull gray and white, where blue oceans and green forests, roads and cities and fields had once been.

“There,” Dr. Weller said. “See it?”

Lemuel saw it, all right. His breath caught in his throat at its sheer beauty. The Null-O’s had erected a vast bubble-shield, a sphere of transparent plastic amidst the rolling sea of liquid slag. Within the bubble the terminal itself could be seen, an intricate web of flashing metal and wires that made both Dr. Weller and Lemuel fall silent.

“You see,” Weller explained, as he dropped the rocket through the locks of the shield, “we have only unified the surface of the Earth and perhaps a mile of rock beneath. The vast mass of the planet, however, is unchanged. But the E-bomb will handle that. The still-liquid core of the planet will erupt; the whole sphere will become a new sun. And when the S-bomb goes off, the entire system will become a unified mass of fiery gas.”

Lemuel nodded. “Logical. And then —”

“The G-bomb. The galaxy itself is next. The final stages of the plan — So vast, so awesome, we scarcely dare think of them. The G-bomb, and finally —” Weller smiled slightly, his eyes bright. “Then the U-bomb.”

They landed, and were met by Dr. Frisch, full of nervous excitement. “Dr. Weller!” he gasped. “Something has gone wrong!”

“What is it?”

Frisch’s face was contorted with dismay. By a violent Null-O leap he managed to integrate his mental faculties and throw off thalamic impulses. “A number of human beings have survived!”

Weller was incredulous. “What do you mean? How —”

“I picked up the sound of their voices. I was rotating my ears, enjoying the roar and lap of the slag outside the bubble, when I picked up the noise

of ordinary human beings.”

“But where?”

“Below the surface. Certain wealthy industrialists had secretly transferred their factories below ground, in violation of their governments’ absolute orders to the contrary.”

“Yes, we had an explicit policy to prevent that.”

“These industrialists acted with typical thalamic greed. They transferred whole labor forces below, to work as slaves when war began. At least ten thousand humans were spared. They are still alive. And —”

“And what?”

“They have improvised huge bores, are now moving this way as quickly as possible. We’re going to have a fight on our hands. I’ve already notified the Venus ship. It’s being brought up to the surface at once.”

Lemuel and Dr. Weller glanced at each other in horror. There were only a thousand Null-O’s; they’d be outnumbered ten to one. “This is terrible,” Weller said thickly. “Just when everything seemed near completion. How long before the power towers are ready?”

“It will be another six days before the Earth can be brought up to critical mass,” Frisch muttered. “And the bores are virtually here. Rotate your ears. You’ll hear them.”

Lemuel and Dr. Weller did so. At once, a confusing babble of human voices came to them. A chaotic clang of sound, from a number of bores converging on the two terminal bubbles.

“Perfectly ordinary humans!” Lemuel gasped. “I can tell by the sound!”

“We’re trapped!” Weller grabbed up a blaster, and Frisch did so, too. All the Null-O’s were arming themselves. Work was forgotten. With a shattering roar the snout of a bore burst through the ground and aimed itself directly at them. The Null-O’s fired wildly; they scattered and fell back toward the tower.

A second bore appeared, and then a third. The air was alive with blazing beams of energy, as the Null-O’s fired and the humans fired back. The humans were the most common possible, a variety of laborers taken subsurface by their employers. The lower forms of human life: clerks, bus drivers, day-laborers, typists, janitors, tailors, bakers, turret lathe operators, shipping clerks, baseball players, radio announcers, garage mechanics, policemen, necktie peddlers, ice cream vendors, door-to-door salesmen, bill collectors, receptionists, welders, carpenters, construction laborers, farmers, politicians, merchants — the men and women whose very existence terrified the Null-O’s to their core.

The emotional masses of ordinary people who resented the Great Work, the bombs and bacteria and guided missiles, were coming to the surface. They were rising up — finally. Putting an end to super-logic: rationality without responsibility.

“We haven’t a chance,” Weller gasped. “Forget the towers. Get the ship to the surface.”

A salesman and two plumbers were setting fire to the terminal. A group of men in overalls and canvas shirts were ripping down the wiring. Others just as ordinary were turning their heat guns on the intricate controls. Flames licked up. The terminal tower swayed ominously.

The Venus ship appeared, lifted to the surface by an intricate stage-system. At once the Null-O’s poured into it, in two efficient lines, all of them controlled and integrated as the crazed human beings decimated their ranks.

“Animals,” Weller said sadly. “The mass of men. Mindless animals, dominated by their emotions. Beasts, unable to see things logically.”

A heat beam finished him off, and the man behind moved forward. Finally the last remaining Null-O was aboard, and the great hatches slammed shut. With a thunderous roar the jets of the ship opened, and it shot through the bubble into the sky.

Lemuel lay where he had fallen, when a heat beam, wielded by a crazed electrician, had touched his left leg. Sadly, he saw the ship rise, hesitate, then crash through and dwindle into the flaming sky. Human beings were all around him, repairing the damaged protection bubble, shouting orders and yelling excitedly. The babble of their voices beat against his sensitive ears; feebly, he put his hands up and covered them.

The ship was gone. He had been left behind. But the plan would continue without him.

A distant voice came to him. It was Dr. Frisch aboard the Venus ship, yelling down with cupped hands. The voice was faint, lost in the trackless miles of space, but Lemuel managed to make it out above the noise and hubbub around him.

“Goodbye… We’ll remember you —”

“Work hard!” the boy shouted back. “Don’t give up until the plan is complete!”

“We’ll work…” The voice grew more faint. “We’ll keep on…” It died out, then returned for a brief instant. “We’ll succeed…” And then there was only silence.

With a peaceful smile on his face, a smile of happiness and contentment, satisfaction at a job well done, Lemuel lay back and waited for the pack of irrational human animals to finish him.

To Serve the Master

Applequist was cutting across a deserted field, up a narrow path beside the yawning crack of a ravine, when he heard the voice.

He stopped frozen, hand on his S-pistol. For a long time he listened, but there was only the distant lap of the wind among the broken trees along the ridge, a hollow murmuring that mixed with the rustle of the dry grass beside him. The sound had come from the ravine. Its bottom was snarled and debris-filled. He crouched down at the lip and tried to locate the voice.

There was no motion. Nothing to give away the place. His legs began to ache. Flies buzzed at him, settled on his sweating forehead. The sun made his head ache; the dust clouds had been thin the last few months.

His radiation-proof watch told him it was three o'clock. Finally he shrugged and got stiffly to his feet. The hell with it. Let them send out an armed team. It wasn't his business; he was a letter carrier grade four, and a civilian.

As he climbed the hill toward the road, the sound came again. And this time, standing high above the ravine, he caught a flash of motion. Fear and puzzled disbelief touched him. It couldn't be — but he had seen it with his own eyes. It wasn't a newscircular rumor.

What was a robot doing down in the deserted ravine? All robots had been destroyed years ago. But there it lay, among the debris and weeds. A rusted, half-corroded wreck. Calling feebly up at him as he passed along the trail.

The Company defense ring admitted him through the three-stage lock into the tunnel area. He descended slowly, deep in thought all the way down to the organizational level. As he slid off his letter pack Assistant Supervisor Jenkins hurried over.

“Where the hell have you been? It’s almost four.”

“Sorry.” Applequist turned his S-pistol over to a nearby guard. “What are the chances of a five hour pass? There’s something I want to look into.”

“Not a chance. You know they’re scrapping the whole right wing setup. They need everybody on strict twenty-four hour alert.”

Applequist began sorting letters. Most were personals between big-shot supervisors of the North American Companies. Letters to entertainment women beyond the Company peripheries. Letters to families and petitions from minor officials. “In that case,” he said thoughtfully, “I’ll have to go anyhow.”

Jenkins eyed the young man suspiciously. “What’s going on? Maybe you found some undamaged equipment left over from the war. An intact cache, buried someplace? Is that it?”

Applequist almost told him, at that point. But he didn’t. “Maybe,” he answered indifferently. “It’s possible.”

Jenkins shot him a grimace of hate and stalked off to roll aside the doors of the observation chamber. At the big wall map officials were examining the day’s activities. Half a dozen middle-aged men, most of them bald, collars dirty and stained, lounged around in chairs. In the corner Supervisor Rudde was sound asleep, fat legs stuck out in front of him, hairy chest visible under his open shirt. These were the men who ran the Detroit Company. Ten thousand families, the whole subsurface living-shelter, depended on them.

“What’s on your mind?” a voice rumbled in Applequist’s ear. Director Laws had come into the chamber and, as usual, taken him unawares.

“Nothing, sir,” Applequist answered. But the keen eyes, blue as china, bored through and beneath. “The usual fatigue. My tension index is up. I’ve been meaning to take some of my leave, but with all the work…”

“Don’t try to fool me. A fourth-class letter carrier isn’t needed. What are you really getting at?”

“Sir,” Applequist said bluntly, “why were the robots destroyed?”

There was silence. Laws’ heavy face registered surprise, then hostility. Before he could speak Applequist hurried on: “I know my class is forbidden to make theoretical inquiries. But it’s very important I find out.”

“The subject is closed,” Laws rumbled ominously. “Even to top-level personnel.”

“What did the robots have to do with the war? Why was the war fought? What was life like before the war?”

“The subject,” Laws repeated, “is closed.” He moved slowly toward the wall map and Applequist was left standing alone, in the middle of the clicking machines, among the murmuring officials and bureaucrats.

Automatically, he resumed sorting letters. There had been the war, and robots were involved in it. That much he knew. A few had survived; when he was a child his father had taken him to an industrial center and he had seen them at their machines. Once, there had been more complex types. Those were all gone; even the simple ones would soon be scrapped. Absolutely no more were manufactured.

“What happened?” he had asked, as his father dragged him away. “Where did all the robots go?”

No answer then either. That was sixteen years ago, and now the last had been scrapped. Even the memory of robots was disappearing; in a few years

the word itself would cease. *Robots.* What had happened?

He finished with the letters and moved out of the chamber. None of the supervisors noticed; they were arguing some erudite point of strategy. Maneuvering and countermaneuvering among the Companies. Tension and exchanged insults. He found a crushed cigarette in his pocket and inexpertly lit up.

“Dinner call,” the passage speaker announced tinnily. “One hour break for top class personnel.”

A few supervisors filed noisily past him. Applequist crushed out his cigarette and moved toward his station. He worked until six. Then his dinner hour came up. No other break until Saturday. But if he went without dinner…

The robot was probably a low-order type, scrapped with the final group. The inferior kind he had seen as a child. It couldn’t be one of the elaborate war-time robots. To have survived in the ravine, rusting and rotting through the years since the war…

His mind skirted the hope. Heart pounding, he entered a lift and touched the stud. By nightfall he’d know.

The robot lay among heaps of metal slag and weeds. Jagged, rusted fragments barred Applequist’s way as he move cautiously down the side of the ravine, S-gun in one hand, radiation mask pulled tight over his face.

His counter clicked loudly: the floor of the ravine was hot. Pools of contamination, over the reddish metal fragments, the piles and masses of fused steel and plastic and gutted equipment. He kicked webs of blackened wiring aside and gingerly stepped past the yawning fuel-tank of some ancient machine, now overgrown with vines. A rat scuttled off. It was almost sunset. Dark shadows lay over everything.

The robot was watching him silently. Half of it was gone; only the head, arms, and upper trunk remained. The lower waist ended in shapeless struts, abruptly sliced off. It was clearly immobile. Its whole surface was pitted and corroded. One eye-lens was missing. Some of its metal fingers were bent grotesquely. It lay on its back facing the sky.

It was a war-time robot, all right. In the one remaining eye glinted archaic consciousness. This was not the simple worker he had glimpsed as a child. Applequist's breath hammered in his throat. This was the real thing. It was following his movements intently. It was alive.

All this time, Applequist thought. *All these years.* The hackles of his neck rose. Everything was silent, the hills and trees and masses of ruin. Nothing stirred; he and the ancient robot were the only living things. *Down here in this crack waiting for somebody to come along.*

A cold wind rustled at him and he automatically pulled his overcoat together. Some leaves blew over the inert face of the robot. Vines had crept along its trunk, twisted into its works. It had been rained on; the sun had shone on it. In winter the snow had covered it. Rats and animals had sniffed at it. Insects had crawled through it. And it was still alive.

"I heard you," Applequist muttered. "I was walking along the path."

Presently the robot said, "I know. I saw you stop." Its voice was faint and dry. Like ashes rubbing together. Without quality or pitch. "Would you make the date known to me? I suffered a power failure for an indefinite period. Wiring terminals shorted temporarily."

"It's June 11," Applequist said. "2136," he added.

The robot was obviously hoarding its meager strength. It moved one arm slightly, then let it fall back. Its one good eye blurred over, and deep within, gears whirred rustily. Realization came to Applequist: the robot

might expire any moment. It was a miracle it had survived this long. Snails clung to its body. It was criss-crossed with slimy trails. A century…

"How long have you been here?" he demanded. "Since the war?"

"Yes."

Applequist grinned nervously. "That's a long time. Over a hundred years."

"That's so."

It was getting dark fast. Automatically, Applequist fumbled for his flashlight. He could hardly make out the sides of the ravine. Someplace a long way off a bird croaked dismally in the darkness. The bushes rustled.

"I need help," the robot said. "Most of my motor equipment was destroyed. I can't move from here."

"In what condition is the rest of you? Your energy supply. How long can __"

"There's been considerable cell destruction. Only a limited number of relay circuits still function. And those are overloaded." The robot's one good eye was on him again. "What is the technological situation? I have seen airborne ships fly overhead. You still manufacture and maintain electronic equipment?"

"We operate an industrial unit near Pittsburgh."

"If I describe basic electronic units will you understand?" the robot asked.

"I'm not trained in mechanical work. I'm classed as a fourth grade letter carrier. But I have contacts in the repair department. We keep our own

machines functioning." He licked his lips tensely. "It's risky, of course. There are laws."

"Laws?"

"All robots were destroyed. You are the only one left. The rest were liquidated years ago."

No expression showed in the robot's eye. "Why did you come down here?" it demanded. Its eye moved to the S-gun in Applequist's hand. "You are a minor official in some hierarchy. Acting on orders from above. A mechanically-operating integer in a larger system."

Applequist laughed. "I suppose so." Then he stopped laughing. "Why was the war fought? What was life like before?"

"Don't you know?"

"Of course not. No theoretical knowledge is permitted, except to top-level personnel. And even the Supervisors don't know about the war." Applequist squatted down and shone the beam of his flashlight into the darkening face of the robot. "Things were different before, weren't they? We didn't always live in subsurface shelters. The world wasn't always a scrap heap. People didn't always slave for their Companies."

"Before the war there were no Companies."

Applequist grunted with triumph. "I knew it."

"Men lived in cities, which were demolished in the war. Companies, which were protected, survived. Officials of these Companies became the government. The war lasted a long time. Everything of value was destroyed. What you have left is a burned-out shell." The robot was silent a moment and then continued, "The first robot was built in 1979. By 2000 all

routine work was done by robots. Human beings were free to do what they wanted. Art, science, entertainment, whatever they liked."

"What is art?" Applequist asked.

"Creative work, directed toward realization of an internal standard. The whole population of the earth was free to expand culturally. Robots maintained the world; man enjoyed it."

"What were cities like?"

"Robots rebuilt and reconstructed new cities according to plans drawn up by human artists. Clean, sanitary, attractive. They were the cities of gods."

"Why was the war fought?"

The robot's single eye flickered. "I've already talked too much. My power supply is dangerously low."

Applequist trembled. "What do you need? I'll get it."

"Immediately, I need an atomic A pack. Capable of putting out ten thousand f-units."

"Yes."

"After that, I'll need tools and aluminum sections. Low resistance wiring. Bring pen and paper — I'll give you a list. You won't understand it, but someone in electronic maintenance will. A power supply is the first need."

"And you'll tell me about the war?"

“Of course.” The robot’s dry rasp faded into silence. Shadows flickered around it; cold evening air stirred the dark weeds and bushes. “Kindly hurry. Tomorrow, if possible.”

“I ought to turn you in,” Assistant Supervisor Jenkins snapped. “Half an hour late, and now this business. What are you doing? You want to get fired out of the Company?’

Applequist pushed close to the man. “I have to get this stuff. The — cache is below surface. I have to construct a secure passage. Otherwise the whole thing will be buried by falling debris.”

“How large a cache is it?” Greed edged suspicion off Jenkins’ gnarled face. He was already spending the Company reward. “Have you been able to see in? Are there unknown machines?”

“I didn’t recognize any,” Applequist said impatiently. “Don’t waste time. The whole mass of debris is apt to collapse. I have to work fast.”

“Where is it? I want to see it!”

“I’m doing this alone. You supply the material and cover for my absence. That’s your part.”

Jenkins twisted uncertainly. “If you’re lying to me, Applequist —”

“I’m not lying,” Applequist answered angrily. “When can I expect the power unit?”

“Tomorrow morning. I’ll have to fill out a bushel of forms. Are you sure you can operate it? I better send a repair team along with you. To be sure —”

“I can handle it.” Applequist interrupted. “Just get me the stuff. I’ll take care of the rest.”

Morning sunlight filtered over the rubble and trash. Applequist nervously fitted the new power pack in place, screwed the leads tight, clamped the corroded shield over it, and then got shakily to his feet. He tossed away the old pack and waited.

The robot stirred. Its eye gained life and awareness. Presently it moved its arm in exploratory motions, over its damaged trunk and shoulders.

“All right?” Applequist demanded huskily.

“Apparently.” The robot’s voice was stronger; full and more confident. “The old power pack was virtually exhausted. It was fortunate you came along when you did.”

“You say men lived in cities,” Applequist plunged in eagerly. “Robots did the work?”

“Robots did the routine labor needed to maintain the industrial system. Humans had leisure to enjoy whatever they wanted. We were glad to do their work for them. It was our job.”

“What happened? What went wrong?’

The robot accepted the pencil and paper; as it talked it carefully wrote down figures. “There was a fanaitic group of humans. A religious organization. They claimed that God intended man to work by the sweat of his brow. They wanted robots scrapped and men put back in the factories to slave away at routine tasks.”

“But why?”

“They claimed work was spiritually ennabling.” The robot tossed the paper back. “Here’s the list of what I want. I’ll need those materials and tools to restore my damaged system.”

Applequist fingered the paper. “This religious group —”

“Men separated in two factions. The Moralists and the Leisurists. They fought each other for years, while we stood on the sidelines waiting to know our fate. I couldn’t believe the Moralists would win out over reason and common sense. But they did.”

“Do you think —” Applequist began, and then broke off. He could hardly give voice to the thought that was struggling inside him. “Is there a chance robots might be brought back?”

“Your meaning is obscure.” The robot abruptly snapped the pencil in half and threw it away. “What are you driving at?”

“Life isn’t pleasant in the Companies. Death and hard work. Forms and shifts and work periods and orders.”

“It’s your system. I’m not responsible.”

“How much do you recall about robot construction? What were you, before the war?”

“I was a unit controller. I was on my way to an emergency unit-factory, when my ship was shot down.” The robot indicated the debris around it. “That was my ship and cargo.”

“What is a unit controller?”

“I was in charge of robot manufacture. I designed and put into production basic robot types.”

Applequist’s head spun dizzily. “Then you do know robot construction.”

“Yes.” The robot gestured urgently at the paper in Applequist’s hand. “Kindly get those tools and materials as soon as possible. I’m completely helpless this way. I want my mobility back. If a rocketship should fly overhead…”

“Communication between Companies is bad. I deliver my letters on foot. Most of the country is in ruins. You could work undetected. What about your emergency unit-factory? Maybe it wasn’t destroyed.”

The robot nodded slowly. “It was carefully concealed. There is the bare possibility. It was small, but completely outfitted. Self-sufficient.”

“If I get repair parts, can you —”

“We’ll discuss this later.” The robot sank back down. “When you return, we’ll talk further.”

He got the material from Jenkins, and a twenty-four hour pass. Fascinated, he crouched against the wall of the ravine as the robot systematically pulled apart its own body and replaced the damaged elements. In a few hours a new motor system had been installed. Basic leg cells were welded into position. By noon the robot was experimenting with its pedal extremities.

“During the night,” the robot said, “I was able to make weak radio contact with the emergency unit-factory. It exists intact, according to the robot monitor.”

“Robot? You mean —”

“An automatic machine for relaying transmission. Not alive, as I am. Strictly speaking, I’m not a robot.” Its voice swelled. “I’m an android.”

The fine distinction was lost on Applequist. His mind was racing excitedly over the possibilities. “Then we can go ahead. With your

knowledge, and the materials available at the —”

“You didn’t see the terror and destruction. The Moralists systematically demolished us. Each town they seized was cleared of androids. Those of my race were brutally wiped out, as the Leisurists retreated. We were torn from our machines and destroyed.”

“But that was a century ago! Nobody wants to destroy robots any more. We need robots to rebuild the world. The Moralists won the war and left the world in ruins.”

The robot adjusted its motor system until its legs were coordinated. “Their victory was a tragedy, but I understand the situation better than you. We must advance cautiously. If we are wiped out this time, it may be for good.” Applequist followed after the robot as it moved hesitantly through the debris toward the wall of the ravine.

“We’re crushed by work. Slaves in underground shelters. We can’t go on this way. People will welcome robots. We need you. When I think how it must have been in the Golden Age, the fountains and flowers, the beautiful cities above ground… Now there’s nothing but ruin and misery. The Moralists won, but nobody’s happy. We’d gladly —”

“Where are we? What is the location here?”

“Slightly west of the Mississippi, a few miles or so. We must have freedom. We can’t live this way, toiling underground. If we had free time we could investigate the mysteries of the whole universe. I found some old scientific tapes. Theoretical work in biology. Those men spent years working on abstract topics. They had the time. They were free. While robots maintained the economic system those men could go out and —”

“During the war,” the robot said thoughtfully, “the Moralists rigged up detection screens over hundreds of square miles. Are those screens still functioning?”

“I don’t know. I doubt it. Nothing outside of the immediate Company shelters still works.”

The robot was deep in thought. It had replaced its ruined eye with a new cell; both eyes flickered with concentration. “Tonight we’ll make plans concerning your Company. I’ll let you know my decision then. Meanwhile, don’t bring this situation up with anyone. You understand? Right now I’m concerned with the road system.”

“Most roads are in ruins.” Applequist tried hard to hold back his excitement. “I’m convinced most in my Company are — Leisurists. Maybe a few at the top are Moralists. Some of the supervisors, perhaps. But the lower classes and families —”

“All right,” the robot interrupted. “We’ll see about that later.” It glanced around. “I can use some of that damaged equipment. Part of it will function. For the moment, at least.”

Applequist managed to avoid Jenkins, as he hurriedly made his way across the organizational level to his work station. His mind was in a turmoil. Everything around him seemed vague and unconvincing. The quarreling supervisors. The clattering, humming machines. Clerks and minor bureaucrats hurrying back and forth with messages and memoranda. He grabbed a mass of letters and mechanically began sorting them into their slots.

“You’ve been outside,” Director Laws observed sourly. “What is it, a girl? If you marry outside the Company you lose the little rating you have.”

Applequist pushed aside his letters. “Director, I want to talk to you.”

Director Laws shook his head. “Be careful. You know the ordinances governing fourth-class personnel. Better not ask any more questions. Keep your mind on your work and leave the theoretical issues to us.”

“Director,” Applequist asked, “which side was our Company, Moralist or Leisurist?”

Laws didn’t seem to understand the question. “What do you mean?” He shook his head. “I don’t know those words.”

“In the war. Which side of the war were we on?”

“Good God,” Law said. “The human side, of course.” An expression like a curtain dropped over his heavy face. “What do you mean, *Moralist?* What are you talking about?”

Suddenly Applequist was sweating. His voice would hardly come. “Director, something’s wrong. The war was between the two groups of humans. The Moralists destroyed the robots because they disapproved of humans living in leisure.”

“The war was fought between men and robots,” Laws said harshly. “We won. We destroyed the robots.”

“But they worked for us!”

“They were built as workers, but they revolted. They had a philosophy. Superior beings — androids. They considered us nothing but cattle.”

Applequist was shaking all over. “But it told me —”

“They slaughtered us. Millions of humans died, before we got the upper hand. They murdered, lied, hid, stole, did everything to survive. It was them or us — no quarter.” Laws grabbed Applequist by the collar. “You damn fool! What the hell have you done? Answer me! What have you done?”

The sun was setting, as the armored twin-track roared up to the edge of the ravine. Troops leaped out and poured down the sides, S-rifles clattering. Laws emerged quickly, Applequist beside him.

“This is the place?” Laws demanded.

“Yes.” Applequist sagged. “But it’s gone.”

“Naturally. It was fully repaired. There was nothing to keep it here.” Laws signalled his men. “No use looking. Plant a tactical A-bomb and let’s get out of here. The air fleet may be able to catch it. We’ll spray this area with radioactive gas.”

Applequist wandered numbly to the edge of the ravine. Below, in the darkening shadows, were the weeds and tumbled debris. There was no sign of the robot, of course. A place where it had been, bits of wire and discarded body sections. The old power pack where he had thrown it. A few tools. Nothing else.

“Come on,” Laws ordered his men. “Let’s get moving. We have a lot to do. Get the general alarm system going.”

The troops began climbing the sides of the ravine. Applequist started after them, toward the twin-track.

“No,” Laws said quickly. “You’re not coming with us.”

Applequist saw the look on their faces. The pent-up fear, the frantic terror and hate. He tried to run, but they were on him almost at once. They worked grimly and silently. When they were through they kicked aside his still-living remains and climbed into the twin-track. They slammed the locks and the motor thundered up. The track rumbled down the trail to the road. In a few moments it dwindled and was gone.

He was alone, with the half-buried bomb and the settling shadows. And the vast empty darkness that was collecting everywhere.

Exhibit Piece

“That’s a strange suit you have on,” the robot pubtrans driver observed. It slid back its door and came to rest at the curb. “What are the little round things?”

“Those are buttons,” George Miller explained. “They are partly functional, partly ornamental. This is an archaic suit of the twentieth century. I wear it because of the nature of my employment.”

He paid the robot, grabbed up his briefcase, and hurried along the ramp to the History Agency. The main building was already open for the day; robed men and women wandered everywhere. Miller entered a PRIVATE lift, squeezed between two immense controllers from the pre-Christian division, and in a moment was on his way to his own level, the Middle Twentieth Century.

“Gorning,” he murmured, as Controller Fleming met him at the atomic engine exhibit.

“Gorning,” Fleming responded brusquely. “Look here, Miller. Let’s have this out once and for all. What if everyone dressed like you? The Government sets up strict rules for dress. Can’t you forget your damn anachronisms once in a while? What in God’s name is that thing in your hand? It looks like a squashed Jurassic lizard.”

“This is an alligator hide briefcase,” Miller explained. “I carry my study spools in it. The briefcase was an authority symbol of the managerial class of the later twentieth century.” He unzipped the briefcase. “Try to understand, Fleming. By accustoming myself to everyday objects of my research period I transform my relation from mere intellectual curiosity to genuine empathy. You have frequently noticed I pronounce certain words oddly. The accent is that of an American businessman of the Eisenhower administration. Dig me?”

“Eh?” Fleming muttered.

“*Dig me* was a twentieth-century expression.” Miller laid out his study spools on his desk. “Was there anything you wanted? If not I’ll begin today’s work. I’ve uncovered fascinating evidence to indicate that although twentieth-century Americans laid their own floor tiles, they did not weave their own clothing. I wish to alter my exhibits on this matter.”

“There’s no fanatic like an academician,” Fleming grated. “You’re two hundred years behind times. Immersed in your relics and artifacts. Your damn authentic replicas of discarded trivia.”

“I love my work,” Miller answered mildly.

“Nobody complains about your work. But there are other things than work. You’re a political-social unit here in this society. Take warning, Miller! The Board has reports on your eccentricities. They approve devotion to work…” His eyes narrowed significantly. “But you go too far.”

“My first loyalty is to my art,” Miller said.

“Your what? What does that mean?”

“A twentieth-century term.” There was undisguised superiority on Miller’s face. “You’re nothing but a minor bureaucrat in a vast machine. You’re a function of an impersonal cultural totality. You have no standards of your own. In the twentieth century men had personal standards of workmanship. Artistic craft. Pride of accomplishment. These words mean nothing to you. You have no soul — another concept from the golden days of the twentieth century when men were free and could speak their minds.”

“Beware, Miller!” Fleming blanched nervously and lowered his voice. “You damn scholars. Come up out of your tapes and face reality. You’ll get us all in trouble, talking this way. Idolize the past, if you want. But remember — it’s gone and buried. Times change. Society progresses.” He

gestured impatiently at the exhibits that occupied the level. “That’s only an imperfect replica.”

“You impugn my research?” Miller was seething. “This exhibit is absolutely accurate! I correct it to all new data. There isn’t anything I don’t know about the twentieth century.”

Fleming shook his head. “It’s no use.” He turned and stalked wearily off the level, onto the descent ramp.

Miller straightened his collar and bright hand-painted necktie. He smoothed down his blue pin stripe coat, expertly lit a pipeful of two-century-old tobacco, and returned to his spools.

Why didn’t Fleming leave him alone? Fleming, the officious representative of the great hierarchy that spread like a sticky gray web over the whole planet. Into each industrial, professional, and residential unit. Ah, the freedom of the twentieth century! He slowed his tape scanner a moment, and a dreamy look slid over his features. The exciting age of virility and individuality, when men were men —

It was just about then, just as he was settling deep in the beauty of his research, that he heard the inexplicable sounds. They came from the center of his exhibit, from within the intricate, carefully regulated interior.

Somebody was in his exhibit.

He could hear them back there, back in the depths. Somebody or something had gone past the safety barrier set up to keep the public out. Miller snapped off his tape scanner and got slowly to his feet. He was shaking all over as he moved cautiously toward the exhibit. He killed the barrier and climbed the railing on to a concrete pavement. A few curious visitors blinked, as the small, oddly dressed man crept among the authentic replicas of the twentieth century that made up the exhibit and disappeared within.

Breathing hard, Miller advanced up the pavement and on to a carefully tended gravel path. Maybe it was one of the other theorists, a minion of the Board, snooping around looking for something with which to discredit him. An inaccuracy here — a trifling error of no consequence there. Sweat came out of his forehead; anger became terror. To his right was a flower bed. Paul Scarlet roses and low-growing pansies. Then the moist green lawn. The gleaming white garage, with its door half up. The sleek rear of a 1954 Buick — and then the house itself.

He'd have to be careful. If this *was* somebody from the Board he'd be up against official hierarchy. Maybe it was somebody big. Maybe even Edwin Carnap, President of the Board, the highest ranking official in the N'York branch of the World Directorate. Shakily, Miller climbed the three cement steps. Now he was on the porch of the twentieth-century house that made up the center of the exhibit.

It was a nice little house; if he had lived back in those days he would have wanted one of his own. Three bedrooms, a ranch style California bungalow. He pushed open the front door and entered the living room. Fireplace at one end. Dark wine-colored carpets. Modern couch and easy chair. Low hardwood glass-topped coffee table. Copper ashtrays. A cigarette lighter and a stack of magazines. Sleek plastic and steel floor lamps. A bookcase. Television set. Picture window overlooking the front garden. He crossed the room to the hall.

The house was amazingly complete. Below his feet the floor furnace radiated a faint aura of warmth. He peered into the first bedroom. A woman's boudoir. Silk bedcover. White starched sheets. Heavy drapes. A vanity table. Bottles and jars. Huge round mirror. Clothes visible within the closet. A dressing gown thrown over the back of a chair. Slippers. Nylon hose carefully placed at the foot of the bed.

Miller moved down the hall and peered into the next room. Brightly painted wallpaper: clowns and elephants and tight-rope walkers. The children's room. Two little beds for the two boys. Model airplanes. A dresser with a radio on it, pair of combs, school books, pennants, a No

Parking sign, snapshots stuck in the mirror. A postage stamp album. Nobody there, either.

Miller peered in the modern bathroom, even in the yellow-tiled shower. He passed through the dining room, glanced down the basement stairs where the washing machine and dryer were. Then he opened the back door and examined the back yard. A lawn, and the incinerator. A couple of small trees and then the three-dimensional projected backdrop of other houses receding off into incredibly convincing blue hills. And still no one. The yard was empty — deserted. He closed the door and started back.

From the kitchen came laughter.

A woman's laugh. The clink of spoons and dishes. And smells. It took him a moment to identify them, scholar that he was. Bacon and coffee. And hot cakes. Somebody was eating breakfast. A twentieth-century breakfast.

He made his way down the hall, past a man's bedroom, shoes and clothing strewn about, to the entrance of the kitchen.

A handsome late-thirtyish woman and two teenage boys were sitting around the little chrome and plastic breakfast table. They had finished eating; the two boys were fidgeting impatiently. Sunlight filtered through the window over the sink. The electric clock read half past eight. The radio was chirping merrily in the corner. A big pot of black coffee rested in the center of the table, surrounded by empty plates and milk glasses and silverware.

The woman had on a white blouse and checkered tweed skirt. Both boys wore faded blue jeans, sweatshirts, and tennis shoes. As yet they hadn't noticed him. Miller stood frozen at the doorway, while laughter and small talk bubbled around him.

"You'll have to ask your father," the woman was saying, with mock sternness. "Wait until he comes back."

“He already said we could,” one of the boys protested.

“Well, ask him again.”

“He’s always grouchy in the morning.”

“Not today. He had a good night’s sleep. His hay fever didn’t bother him. The new anti-hist the doctor gave him.” She glanced up at the clock. “Go see what’s keeping him, Don. He’ll be late for work.”

“He was looking for the newspaper.” One of the boys pushed back his chair and got up. “It missed the porch again and fell in the flowers.” He turned towards the door, and Miller found himself confronting him face to face. Briefly, the observation flashed through his mind that the boy looked familiar. Damn familiar — like somebody he knew, only younger. He tensed himself for the impact, as the boy abruptly halted.

“Gee,” the boy said. “You scared me.”

The woman glanced quickly up at Miller. “What are you doing out there, George?” she demanded. “Come on back in here and finish you coffee.”

Miller came slowly into the kitchen. The woman was finishing her coffee; both boys were on their feet and beginning to press around him.

“Didn’t you tell me I could go camping over the weekend up at Russian River with the group from school?” Don demanded. “You said I could borrow a sleeping bag from the gym because the one I had you gave to the Salvation Army because you were allergic to the kapok in it.”

“Yeah,” Miller muttered uncertainly. Don. That was the boy’s name. And his brother, Ted. But how did he know that? At the table the woman had got up and was collecting the dirty dishes to carry over to the sink.

“They said you already promised them,” she said over her shoulder. The dishes clattered into the sink and she began sprinkling soap flakes over them. “But you remember that time they wanted to drive the car and the way they said it, you’d think they had got your okay. And they hadn’t, of course.”

Miller sank weakly down at the table. Aimlessly, he fooled with his pipe. He set it down in the copper ashtray and examined the cuff of his coat. What was happening? His head spun. He got up abruptly and hurried to the window, over the sink.

Houses, streets. The distant hills beyond the town. The sights and sounds of people. The three dimensional projected backdrop was utterly convincing; or was it the projected backdrop? How could he be sure. *What was happening?*

“George, what’s the matter?” Marjorie asked, as she tied a pink plastic apron around her waist and began running hot water in the sink. “You better get the car out and get started to work. Weren’t you saying last night old man Davidson was shouting about employees being late for work and standing around the water cooler talking and having a good time on company time?”

Davidson. The word stuck in Miller’s mind. He knew it, of course. A clear picture leaped up; a tall, white-haired old man, thin and stern. Vest and pocket watch. And the whole office, United Electronic Supply. The twelve-story building in downtown San Francisco. The newspaper and cigar stand in the lobby. The honking cars. Jammed parking lots. The elevator, packed with bright-eyed secretaries, tight sweaters and perfume.

He wandered out of the kitchen, through the hall, past his own bedroom, his wife’s, and into the living room. The front door was open and he stepped out on to the porch.

The air was cool and sweet. It was a bright April morning. The lawns were still wet. Cars moved down Virginia Street, towards Shattuck Avenue.

Early morning commuting traffic, businessmen on their way to work. Across the street Earl Kelly cheerfully waved his Oakland Tribune as he hurried down the pavement towards the bus stop.

A long way off Miller could see the Bay Bridge, Yerba Buena Island, and Treasure Island. Beyond that was San Francisco itself. In a few minutes he'd be shooting across the bridge in his Buick, on his way to the office. Along with thousands of other businessmen in blue pinstripe suits.

Ted pushed past him and out on the porch. "Then it's okay? You don't care if we go camping?"

Miller licked his dry lips. "Ted, listen to me. There's something strange."

"Like what?"

"I don't know." Miller wandered nervously around on the porch. "This is Friday, isn't it?"

"Sure."

"I thought it was." But how did he know it was Friday? How did he know anything? But of course it was Friday. A long hard week — old man Davidson breathing down his neck. Wednesday, especially, when the General Electric order was slowed down because of a strike.

"Let me ask you something," Miller said to his son. "This morning — I left the kitchen to get the newspaper."

Ted nodded. "Yeah. So?"

"I got up and went out of the room. *How long was I gone?* Not long, was I?" He searched for words, but his mind was a maze of disjointed thoughts. "I was sitting at the breakfast table with you all, and then I got up

and went to look for the paper. Right? And then I came back in. Right?" His voice rose desperately. "I got up and shaved and dressed this morning. I ate breakfast. Hot cakes and coffee. Bacon. *Right?"*

"Right," Ted agreed. "So?"

"Like I always do."

"We only have hot cakes on Friday."

Miller nodded slowly. "That's right. Hot cakes on Friday. Because your uncle Frank eats with us Saturday and Sunday and he can't stand hot cakes, so we stopped having them on weekends. Frank is Marjorie's brother. He was in the Marines in the First World War. He was a corporal."

"Goodbye," Ted said, as Don came out to join him. "We'll see you this evening."

School books clutched, the boys sauntered off towards the big modern high school in the center of Berkeley.

Miller reentered the house and automatically began searching the closet for his briefcase. Where was it? Damn it, he needed it. The whole Throckmorton account was in it; Davidson would be yelling his head off if he left it anywhere, like in the True Blue Cafeteria that time they were all celebrating the Yankees' winning the series. Where the hell was it?

He straightened up slowly, as memory came. Of course. He had left it by his work desk, where he had tossed it after taking out the research tapes. While Fleming was talking to him. Back at the History Agency.

He joined his wife in the kitchen. "Look," he said huskily. "Marjorie, I think maybe I won't go down to the office this morning."

Marjorie spun in alarm. "George, is anything wrong?"

“I’m — completely confused.”

“Your hay fever again?”

“No. My mind. What’s the name of that psychiatrist the PTA recommended when Mrs. Bentley’s kid had that fit?” He searched his disorganized brain. “Grunberg, I think. In the Medical-Dental building.” He moved towards the door. “I’ll drop by and see him. Something’s wrong — really wrong. And I don’t know what it is.”

Adam Grunberg was a large heavyset man in his late forties, with curly brown hair and horn-rimmed glasses. After Miller had finished, Grunberg cleared his throat, brushed at the sleeve of his Brooks Bros, suit, and asked thoughtfully, “Did anything happen while you were out looking for the newspaper? Any sort of accident? You might try going over that part in detail. You got up from the breakfast table, went out on the porch, and started looking around in the bushes. And then what?”

Miller rubbed his forehead vaguely. “I don’t know. It’s all confused. I don’t remember looking for any newspaper. I remember coming back in the house. Then it gets clear. But before that it’s all tied up with the History Agency and my quarrel with Fleming.”

“What was that again about your briefcase? Go over that.”

“Fleming said it looked like a squashed Jurassic lizard. And I said —”

“No. I mean, about looking for it in the closet and not finding it.”

“I looked in the closet and it wasn’t there, of course. It’s sitting beside my desk at the History Agency. On the Twentieth Century level. By my exhibits.” A strange expression crossed Miller’s face. “Good God, Grunberg. You realize this may be nothing but an *exhibit?* You and everybody else — maybe you’re not real. Just pieces of this exhibit.”

“That wouldn’t be very pleasant for us, would it?” Grunberg said, with a faint smile.

“People in dreams are always secure until the dreamer wakes up,” Miller retorted.

“So you’re dreaming me,” Grunberg laughed tolerantly. “I suppose I should thank you.”

“I’m not here because I especially like you. I’m here because I can’t stand Fleming and the whole History Agency.”

Grunberg protested. “This Fleming. Are you aware of thinking about him before you went out looking for the newspaper?”

Miller got to his feet and paced around the luxurious office, between the leather-covered chairs and the huge mahogany desk. “I want to face this thing. I’m an exhibit. An artificial replica of the past. Fleming said something like this would happen to me.”

“Sit down, Mr. Miller,” Grunberg said, in a gentle but commanding voice.

When Miller had taken his chair again, Grunberg continued, “I understand what you say. You have a general feeling that everything around you is unreal. A sort of stage.”

“An exhibit.”

“Yes, an exhibit in a museum.”

“In the N’York History Agency. Level R, the Twentieth Century level.”

“And in addition to this general feeling of — insubstantiality, there are specific projected memories of persons and places beyond this world. Another realm in which this one is contained. Perhaps I should say, the reality within which this is only a sort of shadow world.”

“This world doesn’t look shadowy to me.” Miller struck the leather arm of the chair savagely. “This world is completely real. That’s what’s wrong. I came in to investigate the noises and now I can’t get back out. Good God, do I have to wander around this replica the rest of my life?”

“You know, of course, that your feeling is common to most of mankind. Especially during periods of great tension. Where — by the way — was the newspaper? Did you find it?”

“As far as I’m concerned —”

“Is that a source of irritation with you? I see you react strongly to a mention of the newspaper.”

Miller shook his head wearily. “Forget it.”

“Yes, a trifle. The paperboy carelessly throws the newspaper in the bushes, not on the porch. It makes you angry. It happens again and again. Early in the day, just as you’re starting to work. It seems to symbolize in a small way the whole petty frustrations and defeats of your job. Your whole life.”

“Personally, I don’t give a damn about the newspaper.” Miller examined his wristwatch. “I’m going — it’s almost noon. Old man Davidson will be yelling his head off if I’m not at the office by —” He broke off. “There it is again.”

“There what is?”

“All this!” Miller gestured impatiently out the window. “This whole place. This damn world. This *exhibition.”*

“I have a thought,” Doctor Grunberg said slowly. “I’ll put it to you for what it’s worth. Feel free to reject it if it doesn’t fit.” He raised his shrewd, professional eyes. “Ever see kids playing with rocket ships?”

“Lord,” Miller said wretchedly. “I’ve seen commercial rocket freighters hauling cargo between Earth and Jupiter, landing at La Guardia Spaceport.”

Grunberg smiled slightly. “Follow me through on this. A question. Is it job tension?”

“What do you mean?”

“It would be nice,” Grunberg said blandly, “to live in the world of tomorrow. With robots and rocket ships to do all the work. You could just sit back and take it easy. No worries, no cares. No frustrations.”

“My position in the History Agency has plenty of cares and frustrations.” Miller rose abruptly. “Look, Grunberg. Either this is an exhibit on R level of the History Agency, or I’m a middle-class businessman with an escape fantasy. Right now I can’t decide which. One minute I think this is real, and the next minute —”

“We can decide easily,” Grunberg said.

“How?”

“You were looking for the newspaper. Down the path, on to the lawn. *Where did it happen?* Was it on the path? On the porch? Try to remember.”

“I don’t have to try. I was still on the pavement. I had just jumped over the rail past the safety screens.”

“On the pavement. Then go back there. Find the exact place.”

“Why?”

“So you can prove to yourself there’s nothing on the other side.”

Miller took a deep slow breath. “Suppose there is?”

“There can’t be. You said yourself: only one of the worlds can be real. This world is real —” Grunberg thumped his massive mahogany desk. “Ergo, you won’t find anything on the other side.”

“Yes,” Miller said, after a moment’s silence. A peculiar expression cut across his face and stayed there. “You’ve found the mistake.”

“What mistake?” Grunberg was puzzled. “What —”

Miller moved towards the door of the office. “I’m beginning to get it. I’ve been putting up a false question. Trying to decide which world is real.” He grinned humorlessly back at Doctor Grunberg. “They’re both real, of course.”

He grabbed a taxi and headed back to the house. No one was home. The boys were in school and Marjorie had gone downtown to shop. He waited indoors until he was sure nobody was watching along the street, and then started down the path to the pavement.

He found the spot without any trouble. There was a faint shimmer in the air, a weak place just at the edge of the parking strip. Through it he could see faint shapes.

He was right. There it was — complete and real. As real as the pavement under him.

A long metallic bar was cut off by the edges of the circle. He recognized it; the safety railing he had leaped over to enter the exhibit. Beyond it was the safety screen system. Turned off, of course. And beyond that, the rest of the level and the far walls of the History building.

He took a cautious step into the weak haze. It shimmered around him, misty and oblique. The shapes beyond became clearer. A moving figure in a dark blue robe. Some curious person examining the exhibits. The figure moved on and was lost. He could see his own work desk now. His tape scanner and heaps of study spools. Beside the desk was his briefcase, exactly where he had expected it.

While he was considering stepping over the railing to get the briefcase, Fleming appeared.

Some inner instinct made Miller step back through the weak spot, as Fleming approached. Maybe it was the expression on Fleming's face. In any case, Miller was back and standing firmly on the concrete pavement, when Fleming halted just beyond the juncture, face red, lips twisted with indignation.

"Miller," he said thickly. "Come out of there."

Miller laughed. "Be a good fellow, Fleming. Toss me my briefcase. It's that strange looking thing over by the desk. I showed it to you — remember?"

"Stop playing games and listen to me!" Fleming snapped. "This is serious. *Carnap knows.* I had to inform him."

"Good for you. The loyal bureaucrat."

Miller bent over to light his pipe. He inhaled and puffed a great cloud of gray tobacco smoke through the weak spot, out into the R level. Fleming coughed and retreated.

“What’s that stuff?” he demanded.

“Tobacco. One of the things they have around here. Very common substance in the twentieth century. You wouldn’t know about that — your period is the second century, B.C. The Hellenistic world. I don’t know how well you’d like that. They didn’t have very good plumbing back there. Life expectancy was damn short.”

“What are you talking about?”

“In comparison, the life expectancy of *my* research period is quite high. And you should see the bathroom I’ve got. Yellow tile. And a shower. We don’t have anything like that at the Agency leisure-quarters.”

Fleming grunted sourly. “In other words, you’re going to stay in there.”

“It’s a pleasant place,” Miller said easily. “Of course, my position is better than average. Let me describe it for you. I have an attractive wife: marriage is permitted, even sanctioned in this era. I have two fine kids — both boys — who are going up to the Russian River this weekend. They live with me and my wife — we have complete custody of them. The State has no power of that, yet. I have a brand new Buick —”

“Illusions,” Fleming spat. “Psychotic delusions.”

“Are you sure?”

“You damn fool! I always knew you were too ego-recessive to face reality. You and your anachronistic retreats. Sometimes I’m ashamed I’m a theoretician. I wish I had gone into engineering.” Fleming’s lips twitched. “You’re insane, you know. You’re standing in the middle of an artificial exhibit, which is owned by the History Agency, a bundle of plastic and wire and struts. A replica of a past age. An imitation. And you’d rather be there than in the real world.”

“Strange,” Miller said thoughtfully. “Seems to me I’ve heard the same thing very recently. You don’t know a Doctor Grunberg, do you? A psychiatrist.”

Without formality, Director Carnap arrived with his company of assistants and experts. Fleming quickly retreated. Miller found himself facing one of the most powerful figures of the twenty-second century. He grinned and held out his hand.

“You insane imbecile,” Carnap rumbled. “Get out of there before we drag you out. If we have to do that, you’re through. You know what they do with advanced psychotics. It’ll be euthanasia for you. I’ll give you one last chance to come out of that fake exhibit —”

“Sorry,” Miller said. “It’s not an exhibit.”

Carnap’s heavy face registered sudden surprise. For a brief instant his massive pose vanished. “You still try to maintain —”

“This is a time gate,” Miller said quietly. “You can’t get me out, Carnap. You can’t reach me. I’m in the past, two hundred years back. I’ve crossed back to a previous existence-coordinate. I found a bridge and escaped from your continuum to this. And there’s nothing you can do about it.”

Carnap and his experts huddled together in a quick technical conference. Miller waited patiently. He had plenty of time; he had decided not to show up at the office until Monday.

After a while Carnap approached the juncture again, being careful not to step over the safety rail. “An interesting theory, Miller. That’s the strange part about psychotics. They rationalize their delusions into a logical system. *A priori*, your concept stands up well. It’s internally consistent. Only —”

“Only what?”

“Only it doesn’t happen to be true.” Carnap had regained his confidence; he seemed to be enjoying the interchange. “You think you’re really back in the past. Yes, this exhibit is extremely accurate. Your work has always been good. The authenticity of detail is unequalled by any of the other exhibits.”

“I tried to do my work well,” Miller murmured.

“You wore archaic clothing and affected archaic speech mannerisms. You did everything possible to throw yourself back. You devoted yourself to your work.” Carnap tapped the safety railing with his fingernail. “It would be a shame, Miller. A terrible shame to demolish such an authentic replica.”

“I see your point,” Miller said, after a time. “I agree with you, certainly. I’ve been very proud of my work — I’d hate to see it all torn down. But that really won’t do you any good. All you’ll succeed in doing is closing the time gate.”

“You’re sure?”

“Of course. The exhibit is only a bridge, a link with the past. I passed *through* the exhibit, but I’m not there now. I’m beyond the exhibit.” He grinned tightly. “Your demolition can’t reach me. But seal me off, if you want. I don’t think I’ll be wanting to come back. I wish you could see this side, Carnap. It’s a nice place here. Freedom, opportunity. Limited government, responsible to the people. If you don’t like a job here you quit. There’s no euthanasia, here. Come on over. I’ll introduce you to my wife.”

“We’ll get you,” Carnap said. “And all your psychotic figments along with you.”

“I doubt if any of my ‘psychotic figments’ are worried. Grunberg wasn’t. I don’t think Marjorie is —”

“We’ve already begun demolition preparations,” Carnap said calmly. “We’ll do it piece by piece, not all at once. So you may have the opportunity to appreciate the scientific and — *artistic* way we take your imaginary world apart.”

“You’re wasting your time,” Miller said. He turned and walked off, down the pavement, to the gravel path and up on to the front porch of the house.

In the living room he threw himself down in the easy chair and snapped on the television set. Then he went to the kitchen and got a can of ice cold beer. He carried it happily back into the safe, comfortable living room.

As he was seating himself in front of the television set he noticed something rolled up on the low coffee table.

He grinned wryly. It was the morning newspaper, which he had looked so hard for. Marjorie had brought it in with the milk, as usual. And of course forgotten to tell him. He yawned contentedly and reached over to pick it up. Confidently, he unfolded it — and read the big black headlines.

RUSSIA REVEALS COBALT BOMB

TOTAL WORLD DESTRUCTION AHEAD

The Crawlers

He built , and the more he built the more he enjoyed building. Hot sunlight filtered down; summer breezes stirred around him as he toiled joyfully. When he ran out of material he paused awhile and rested. His edifice wasn’t large; it was more a practice model than the real thing. One part of his brain told him that, and another part thrilled with excitement and pride. It was at least large enough to enter. He crawled down the entrance tunnel and curled up inside in a contented heap.

Through a rent in the roof a few bits of dirt rained down. He oozed binder fluid and reinforced the weak place. In his edifice the air was clean and cool, almost dust-free. He crawled over the inner walls one last time, leaving a quick-drying coat of binder over everything. What else was needed? He was beginning to feel drowsy; in a moment he’d be asleep.

He thought about it, and then he extended a part of himself up through the still-open entrance. That part watched and listened warily, as the rest of him dozed off in a grateful slumber. He was peaceful and content, conscious that from a distance all that was visible was a light mound of dark clay. No one would notice it: no one would guess what lay beneath.

And if they did notice, he had methods of taking care of them.

The farmer halted his ancient Ford truck with a grinding shriek of brakes. He cursed and backed up a few yards. “There’s one. Hop down and take a look at it. Watch the cars — they go pretty fast along here.”

Ernest Gretry pushed the cabin door open and stepped down gingerly onto the hot mid-morning pavement. The air smelled of sun and drying grass. Insects buzzed around him as he advanced cautiously up the highway, hands in his trouser pockets, lean body bent forward. He stopped and peered down.

The thing was well mashed. Wheel marks crossed it in four places and its internal organs had ruptured and burst through. The whole thing was snail-like, a gummy elongated tube with sense organs at one end and a confusing mass of protoplasmic extensions at the other.

What got him most was the face. For a time he couldn't look directly at it: he had to contemplate the road, the hills, the big cedar trees, anything else. There was something in the little dead eyes, a glint that was rapidly fading. They weren't the lusterless eyes of a fish, stupid and vacant. The life he had seen haunted him, and he had got only a brief glimpse, as the truck bore down on it and crushed it flat.

"They crawl across here every once in a while," the farmer said quietly. "Sometimes they get as far as town. The first one I saw was heading down the middle of Grant Street, about fifty yards an hour. They go pretty slow. Some of the teenage kids like to run them down. Personally I avoid them, if I see them."

Gretry kicked aimlessly at the thing. He wondered vaguely how many more there were in the bushes and hills. He could see farmhouses set back from the road, white gleaming squares in the hot Tennessee sun. Horses and sleeping cattle. Dirty chickens scratching. A sleepy, peaceful countryside, basking in the late-summer sun.

"Where's the radiation lab from here?" he asked.

The farmer indicated. "Over there, on the other side of those hills. You want to collect the remains? They have one down at the Standard Oil Station in a big tank. Dead, of course. They filled the tank with kerosene to try to preserve it. That one's in pretty good shape, compared to this. Joe Jackson cracked its head with a two-by-four. He found it crawling across his property one night."

Gretry got shakily back into the truck. His stomach turned over and he had to take some long deep breaths. "I didn't realize there were so many.

When they sent me out from Washington they just said a few had been seen."

"There's been quite a lot." The farmer started up the truck and carefully skirted the remains on the pavement. "We're trying to get used to them, but we can't. It's not nice stuff. A lot of people are moving away. You can feel it in the air, a sort of heaviness. We've got this problem and we have to meet it." He increased speed, leathery hands tight around the wheel. "It seems like there's more of *them* born all the time, and almost no normal children."

Back in town, Gretry called Freeman long distance from the booth in the shabby hotel lobby. "We'll have to do something. They're all around here. I'm going out at three to see a colony of them. The fellow who runs the taxi stand knows where they are. He says there must be eleven or twelve of them together."

"How do the people around there feel?" ;

"How the hell do you expect? They think it's God's Judgment. Maybe they're right."

"We should have made them move earlier. We should have cleaned out the whole area for miles around. Then we wouldn't have this problem." Freeman paused. "What do you suggest?"

"That island we took over for the H-bomb tests."

"It's a damn big island. There was a whole group of natives we moved off and resettled." Freeman choked. "Good God, are there *that* many of them?"

"The staunch citizens exaggerate, of course. But I get the impression there must be at least a hundred."

Freeman was silent a long time. “I didn’t realize,” he said finally. “I’ll have to put it through channels, of course. We were going to make further tests on that island. But I see your point.”

“I’d like it,” Gretry said. “This is a bad business. We can’t have things like this. People can’t live with this sort of thing. You ought to drop out here and take a look. It’s something to remember.”

“I’ll — see what I can do. I’ll talk to Gordon. Give me a ring tomorrow.”

Gretry hung up and wandered out of the drab, dirty lobby onto the blazing sidewalk. Dingy stores and parked cars. A few old men hunched over on steps and sagging cane-bottom chairs. He lit a cigarette and shakily examined his watch. It was almost three. He moved slowly toward the taxi stand.

The town was dead. Nothing stirred. Only the motionless old men in their chairs and the out-of-town cars zipping along the highway. Dust and silence lay over everything. Age, like a gray spider web, covered all the houses and stores. No laughter. No sounds of any kind.

No children playing games.

A dirty blue taxicab pulled up silently beside him. “Okay, mister,” the driver said, a rat-faced man in his thirties, toothpick hanging between his crooked teeth. He kicked the bent door open. “Here we go.”

“How far is it?” Gretry asked, as he climbed in.

“Just outside town.” The cab picked up speed and hurtled noisily along, bouncing and bucking. “You from the FBI?”

“No.”

“I thought from your suit and hat you was.” The driver eyed him curiously. “How’d you hear about the crawlers?”

“From the radiation lab.”

“Yeah, it’s that hot stuff they got there.” The driver turned off the highway and onto a dirt side-road. “It’s up here on the Higgins farm. The crazy damn things picked the bottom of old lady Higgins’ place to build their houses.”
“Houses?”

“They’ve got some sort of city, down under the ground. You’ll see it — the entrances, at least. They work together, building and fussing.” He twisted the cab off the dirt road, between two huge cedars, over a bumpy field; and finally brought it to rest at the edge of a rocky gully. “This is it.”

It was the first time Gretry had seen one alive.

He got out of the cab awkwardly, his legs numb and unresponding. The things were moving slowly between the woods and the entrance tunnels in the center of the clearing. They were bringing building material, clay and weeds. Smearing it with some kind of ooze and plastering it in rough forms which were carefully carried beneath the ground. The crawlers were two or three feet long; some were older than others, darker and heavier. All of them moved with agonizing slowness, a silent flowing motion across the sun-baked ground. They were soft, shell-less, and looked harmless.

Again, he was fascinated and hypnotized by their faces. The weird parody of human faces. Wizened little baby features, tiny shoebutton eyes, slit of a mouth, twisted ears, and a few wisps of damp hair. What should have been arms were elongated pseudopods that grew and receded like soft dough. The crawlers seemed incredibly flexible; they extended themselves, then snapped their bodies back, as their feelers made contact with obstructions. They paid no attention to the two men; they didn’t even seem to be aware of them.

“How dangerous are they?” Gretry asked finally.

“Well, they have some sort of stinger. They stung a dog, I know. Stung him pretty hard. He swelled up and his tongue turned black. He had fits and got hard. He died.” The driver added half-apologetically, “He was nosing around. Interrupting their building. They work all the time. Keep busy.”

“Is this most of them?”

“I guess so. They sort of congregate here. I see them crawling this way.” The driver gestured. “See, they’re born in different places. One or two at each farmhouse, near the radiation lab.”

“Which way is Mrs. Higgins’ farmhouse?” Gretry asked.

“Up there. See it through the trees? You want to —”

“I’ll be right back,” Gretry said, and started abruptly off. “Wait here.”

The old woman was watering the dark red geraniums that grew around her front porch, when Gretry approached. She looked up quickly, her ancient wrinkled face shrewd and suspicious, the sprinkling can poised like a blunt instrument.

“Afternoon,” Gretry said. He tipped his hat and showed her his credentials. “I’m investigating the — crawlers. At the edge of your land.”

“Why?” Her voice was empty, bleak, cold. Like her withered face and body.

“We’re trying to find a solution.” Gretry felt awkward and uncertain. “It’s been suggested we transport them away from here, out to an island in the Gulf of Mexico. They shouldn’t be here. It’s too hard on people. It isn’t right,” he finished lamely.

“No. It isn’t right.”

“And we’ve already begun moving everybody away from the radiation lab. I guess we should have done that a long time ago.”

The old woman’s eyes flashed. “You people and your machines. See what you’ve done!” She jabbed a bony finger at him excitedly. “Now you have to fix it. You have to do something.”

“We’re taking them away to an island as soon as possible. But there’s one problem. We have to be sure about the parents. They have complete custody of them. We can’t just —” He broke off futilely. “How do they feel? Would they let us cart up their — children, and haul them away?”

Mrs. Higgins turned and headed into the house. Uncertainly, Gretry followed her through the dim, dusty interior rooms. Musty chambers full of oil lamps and faded pictures, ancient sofas and tables She led him through a great kitchen of immense cast iron pots and pans down a flight of wooden stairs to a painted white door. She knocked sharply.

Flurry and movement on the other side. The sound of people whispering and moving things hurriedly.

“Open the door,” Mrs. Higgins commanded. After an agonized pause the door opened slowly. Mrs. Higgins pushed it wide and motioned Gretry to follow her.

In the room stood a young man and woman. They backed away as Gretry came in. The woman hugged a long pasteboard carton which the man had suddenly passed to her.

“Who are you?” the man demanded. He abruptly grabbed the carton back; his wife’s small hands were trembling under the shifting weight.

Gretry was seeing the parents of one of them. The young woman, brown-haired, not more than nineteen. Slender and small in a cheap green dress, a full-breasted girl with dark frightened eyes. The man was bigger and stronger, a handsome dark youth with massive arms and competent hands gripping the pasteboard carton tight.

Gretry couldn't stop looking at the carton. Holes had been punched in the top; the carton moved slightly in the man's arms, and there was a faint shudder that rocked it back and forth.

"This man," Mrs. Higgins said to the husband, "has come to take it away."

The couple accepted the information in silence. The husband made no move except to get a better grip on the box.

"He's going to take all of them to an island," Mrs. Higgins said. "It's all arranged. Nobody'll harm them. They'll be safe and they can do what they want. Build and crawl around where nobody has to look at them."

The young woman nodded blankly.

"Give it to him," Mrs. Higgins ordered impatiently. "Give him the box and let's get it over with once and for all."

After a moment the husband carried the box over to a table and put it down. "You know anything about them?" he demanded. "You know what they eat?"

"We —" Gretry began helplessly.

"They eat leaves. Nothing but leaves and grass. We've been bringing in the smallest leaves we could find."

“It’s only a month old,” the young woman said huskily. “It already wants to go down with the others, but we keep it here. We don’t want it to go down here. Not yet. Later, maybe, we thought. We didn’t know what to do. We weren’t sure.” Her large dark eyes flashed briefly in mute appeal, then faded out again. “It’s a hard thing to know.”

The husband untied the heavy brown twine and took the lid from the carton. “Here. You can see it.”

It was the smallest Gretry had seen. Pale and soft, less than a foot long. It had crawled in a corner of the box and was curled up in a messy web of chewed leaves and some kind of wax. A translucent covering spun clumsily around it, behind which it lay asleep. It paid no attention to them; they were out of its scope. Gretry felt a strange helpless horror rise up in him. He moved away, and the young man replaced the lid.

“We knew what it was,” he said hoarsely. “Right away, as soon as it was born. Up the road, there was one we saw. One of the first. Bob Douglas made us come over and look at it. It was his and Julie’s. That was before they started coming down and collecting together by the gully.”

“Tell him what happened,” Mrs. Higgins said.

“Douglas mashed its head with a rock. Then he poured gasoline on it and burned it up. Last week he and Julie packed and left.”

“Have many of them been destroyed?” Gretry managed to ask.

“A few. A lot of men, they see something like that and they go sort of wild. You can’t blame them.” The man’s dark eyes darted hopelessly. “I guess I almost did the same thing.”

“Maybe we should have,” his wife murmured. “Maybe I should have let you.”

Gretry picked up the pasteboard carton and moved toward the door. “We’ll get this done as quickly as we can. The trucks are on the way. It should be over in a day.”

“Thank God for that,” Mrs. Higgins exclaimed in a clipped, emotionless voice. She held the door open, and Gretry carried the carton through the dim, musty house, down the sagging front steps and out into the blazing mid-afternoon sun.

Mrs. Higgins stopped at the red geraniums and picked up her sprinkling can. “When you take them, take them all. Don’t leave any behind. Understand?”

“Yes,” Gretry muttered.

“Keep some of your men and trucks here. Keep checking. Don’t let any stay where we have to look at them.”

“When we get the people near the radiation lab moved away there shouldn’t be any more of —”

He broke off. Mrs. Higgins had turned her back and was watering the geraniums. Bees buzzed around her. The flowers swayed dully with the hot wind. The old woman passed on around the side of the house, still watering and stooping over. In a few moments she was gone and Gretry was alone with his carton.

Embarrassed and ashamed, he carried the carton slowly down the hill and across the field to the ravine. The taxi driver was standing by his cab, smoking a cigarette and waiting patiently for him. The colony of crawlers was working steadily on its city. There were streets and passages. On some of the entrance-mounds he noticed intricate scratches that might have been words. Some of the crawlers were grouped together, setting up involved things he couldn’t make out.

“Let’s go,” he said wearily to the driver.

The driver grinned and yanked the back door. “I left the meter running,” he said, his ratty face bright with craft. “You guys all have a swindle sheet — you don’t care.”

He built, and the more he built the more he enjoyed building. By now the city was over eighty miles deep and five miles in diameter. The whole island had been converted into a single vast city that honeycombed and interlaced farther each day. Eventually it would reach the land beyond the ocean; then the work would begin in earnest.

To his right, a thousand methodically moving companions toiled silently on the structural support that was to reinforce the main breeding chamber. As soon as it was in place everyone would feel better; the mothers were just now beginning to bring forth their young.

That was what worried him. It took some of the joy out ot building. He had seen one of the first born — before it was quickly hidden and the thing hushed up. A brief glimpse of a bulbous head, foreshortened body, incredibly rigid extensions. It shrieked and wailed and turned red in the face. Gurgled and plucked aimlessly and kicked its *feet.*

In horror, somebody had finally mashed the throwback with a rock. And hoped there wouldn’t be any more.

Sales Pitch

Commute ships roared on all sides, as Ed Morris made his way wearily home to Earth at the end of a long hard day at the office. The Ganymede-Terra lanes were choked with exhausted, grim-faced businessmen; Jupiter was in opposition to Earth and the trip was a good two hours. Every few million miles the great flow slowed to a grinding, agonized halt; signal-lights flashed as streams from Mars and Saturn fed into the main traffic-arteries.

"Lord," Morris muttered. "How tired can you *get?"* He locked the autopilot and momentarily turned from the control-board to light a much-needed cigarette. His hands shook. His head swam. It was past six; Sally would be fuming; dinner would be spoiled. The same old thing. Nerve-wracking driving, honking horns and irate drivers zooming past his little ship, furious gesturing, shouting, cursing…

And the ads. That was what really did it. He could have stood everything else — but the ads, the whole long way from Ganymede to Earth. And on Earth, the swarms of sales robots; it was too much. And they were everywhere.

He slowed to avoid a fifty-ship smashup. Repair-ships were scurrying around trying to get the debris out of the lane. His audio-speaker wailed as police rockets hurried up. Expertly, Morris raised his ship, cut between two slow-moving commercial transports, zipped momentarily into the unused left lane, and then sped on, the wreck left behind. Horns honked furiously at him; he ignored them.

"Trans-Solar Products greets you!" an immense voice boomed in his ear. Morris groaned and hunched down in his seat. He was getting near Terra; the barrage was increasing. "Is your tension-index pushed over the safety-margin by the ordinary frustrations of the day? Then you need an Id-Persona Unit. So small it can be worn behind the ear, close to the frontal lobe —"

Thank God, he was past it. The ad dimmed and receded behind, as his fast-moving ship hurtled forward. But another was right ahead.

“Drivers! Thousands of unnecessary deaths each year from inter-planet driving. Hypno-Motor Control from an expert source-point insures your safety. Surrender your body and save your life!” The voice roared louder. “Industrial experts say —”

Both audio ads, the easiest to ignore. But now a visual ad was forming; he winced, closed his eyes, but it did no good.

“Men!” an unctuous voice thundered on all sides of him. “Banish internally-caused obnoxious odors *forever.* Removal by modern painless methods of the gastrointestinal tract and substitution system will relieve you of the most acute cause of social rejection.” The visual image locked; a vast nude girl, blonde hair disarranged, blue eyes half shut, lips parted, head tilted back in sleep-drugged ecstasy. The features ballooned as the lips approached his own. Abruptly the orgiastic expression on the girl’s face vanished. Disgust and revulsion swept across, and then the image faded out.

“Does this happen to you?” the voice boomed. “During erotic sex-play do you offend your love-partner by the presence of gastric processes which —” The voice died, and he was past. His mind his own again, Morris kicked savagely at the throttle and sent the little ship leaping. The pressure, applied directly to the audio-visual regions of his brain, had faded below spark point. He groaned and shook his head to clear it. All around him the vague half-defined echoes of ads glittered and gibbered, like ghosts of distant video-stations. Ads waited on all sides; he steered a careful course, dexterity born of animal desperation, but not all could be avoided. Despair seized him. The outline of a new visual-audio ad was already coming into being.

“You, mister wage-earner!” it shouted into the eyes and ears, noses and throats, of a thousand weary commuters. “Tired of the same old job? Wonder Circuits Inc. has perfected a marvelous long-range thoughtwave

scanner. Know what others are thinking and saying. Get the edge on fellow employees. Learn facts, figures about your employer's personal existence. Banish uncertainty!"

Morris' despair swept up wildly. He threw the throttle on full blast; the little ship bucked and rolled as it climbed from the traffic-lane into the dead zone beyond. A shrieking roar, as his fender whipped through the protective wall — and then the ad faded behind him.

He slowed down, trembling with misery and fatigue. Earth lay ahead. He'd be home, soon. Maybe he could get a good night's sleep. He shakily dropped the nose of the ship and prepared to hook onto the tractor beam of the Chicago commute field.

"The best metabolism adjuster on the market," the salesrobot shrilled. "Guaranteed to maintain a perfect endocrine-balance, or your money refunded in full."

Morris pushed wearily past the salesrobot, up the sidewalk toward the residential-block that contained his living-unit. The robot followed a few steps, then forgot him and hurried after another grim-faced commuter.

"All the news while it's news," a metallic voice dinned at him. "Have a retinal vidscreen installed in your least-used eye. Keep in touch with the world; don't wait for out-of-date hourly summaries."

"Get out of the way," Morris muttered. The robot stepped aside for him and he crossed the street with a pack of hunched-over men and women.

Robot-salesmen were everywhere, gesturing, pleading, shrilling. One started after him and he quickened his pace. It scurried along, chanting its pitch and trying to attract his attention, all the way up the hill to his living-unit. It didn't give up until he stooped over, snatched up a rock, and hurled it futilely. He scrambled in the house and slammed the doorlock after him.

The robot hesitated, then turned and raced after a woman with an armload of packages toiling up the hill. She tried vainly to elude it, without success.

“Darling!” Sally cried. She hurried from the kitchen, drying her hands on her plastic shorts, bright-eyed and excited. “Oh, you poor thing! You look so tired!”

Morris peeled off his hat and coat and kissed his wife briefly on her bare shoulder. “What’s for dinner?”

Sally gave his hat and coat to the closet. “We’re having Uranian wild pheasant; your favorite dish.”

Morris’ mouth watered, and a tiny surge of energy crawled back into his exhausted body. “No kidding? What the hell’s the occasion?”

His wife’s brown eyes moistened with compassion. “Darling, it’s your birthday; you’re thirty-seven years old today. Had you forgotten?”

“Yeah,” Morris grinned a little. “I sure had.” He wandered into the kitchen. The table was set; coffee was steaming in the cups and there was butter and white bread, mashed potatoes and green peas. “My golly. A real occasion.”

Sally punched the stove controls and the container of smoking pheasant was slid onto the table and neatly sliced open. “Go wash your hands and we’re ready to eat. Hurry — before it gets cold.”

Morris presented his hands to the wash slot and then sat down gratefully at the table. Sally served the tender, fragrant pheasant, and the two of them began eating.

“Sally,” Morris said, when his plate was empty and he was leaning back and sipping slowly at his coffee. “I can’t go on like this. Something’s got to be done.”

“You mean the drive? I wish you could get a position on Mars like Bob Young. Maybe if you talked to the Employment Commission and explained to them how all the strain —”

“It’s not just the drive. *They’re right out front.* Everywhere. Waiting for me. All day and night.”

“Who are, dear?”

“Robots selling things. As soon as I set down the ship. Robots and visual-audio ads. They dig right into a man’s brain. They follow people around until they die.”

“I know.” Sally patted his hand sympathetically. “When I go shopping they follow me in clusters. All talking at once. It’s really a panic — you can’t understand half what they’re saying.”

“We’ve got to break out.”

“Break out?” Sally faltered. “What do you mean?”

“We’ve got to get away from them. They’re destroying us.”

Morris fumbled in his pocket and carefully got out a tiny fragment of metal-foil. He unrolled it with painstaking care and smoothed it out on the table. “Look at this. It was circulated in the office, among the men; it got to me and I kept it.”

“What does it mean?” Sally’s brow wrinkled as she made out the words. “Dear, I don’t think you got all of it. There must be more than this.”

“A new world,” Morris said softly. “Where they haven’t got to, yet. It’s a long way off, out beyond the solar system. Out in the stars.”

“Proxima?”

“Twenty planets. Half of them habitable. Only a few thousand people out there. Families, workmen, scientists, some industrial survey teams. Land free for the asking.”

“But it’s so —” Sally made a face. “Dear, isn’t it sort of under-developed? They say it’s like living back in the twentieth century. Flush toilets, bathtubs, gasoline driven cars —”

“That’s right.” Morris rolled up the bit of crumpled metal, his face grim and dead-serious. “It’s a hundred years behind times. None of this.” He indicated the stove and the furnishings in the living room. “We’ll have to do without. We’ll have to get used to a simpler life. The way our ancestors lived.” He tried to smile but his face wouldn’t cooperate. “You think you’d like it? No ads, no salesrobots, traffic moving at sixty miles an hour instead of sixty million. We could raise passage on one of the big trans-system liners. I could sell my commute rocket…”

There was a hesitant, doubtful silence.

“Ed,” Sally began. “I think we should think it over more. What about your job? What would you do out there?”

“I’d find something.”

“But *what?* Haven’t you got that part figured out?” A shrill tinge of annoyance crept into her voice. “It seems to me we should consider that part just a little more before we throw away everything and just — take off.”

“If we don’t go,” Morris said slowly, trying to keep his voice steady, “they’ll get us. There isn’t much time left. I don’t know how much longer I can hold them off.”

“Really, Ed! You make it sound so melodramatic. If you feel that bad why don’t you take some time off and have a complete inhibition check? I was watching a vidprogram and I saw them going over a man whose psychosomatic system was much worse than yours. A much older man.”

She leaped to her feet. “Let’s go out tonight and celebrate. Okay?” Her slim fingers fumbled at the zipper of her shorts. “I’ll put on my new plasti-robe, the one I’ve never had nerve enough to wear.”

Her eyes sparkled with excitement as she hurried into the bedroom. “You know the one I mean? When you’re up close it’s translucent but as you get farther off it becomes more and more sheer until —”

“I know the one,” Morris said wearily. “I’ve seen them advertised on my way home from work.” He got slowly to his feet and wandered into the living room. At the door of the bedroom he halted. “Sally —”

“Yes?”

Morris opened his mouth to speak. He was going to ask her again, talk to her about the metal-foil fragment he had carefully wadded up and carried home. He was going to talk to her about the frontier. About Proxima Centauri. Going away and never coming back. But he never had a chance.

The doorchimes sounded.

“Somebody’s at the door!” Sally cried excitedly. “Hurry up and see who it is!”

In the evening darkness the robot was a silent, unmoving figure. A cold wind blew around it and into the house. Morris shivered and moved back from the door. “What do you want?” he demanded. A strange fear licked at him. “What is it?”

The robot was larger than any he had seen. Tall and broad, with heavy metallic grippers and elongated eye-lenses. Its upper trunk was a square tank instead of the usual cone. It rested on four treads, not the customary two. It towered over Morris, almost seven feet high. Massive and solid.

"Good evening," it said calmly. Its voice was whipped around by the night wind; it mixed with the dismal noises of evening, the echoes of traffic and the clang of distant street signals. A few vague shapes hurried through the gloom. The world was black and hostile.

"Evening," Morris responded automatically. He found himself trembling. "What are you selling?"

"I would like to show you a fasrad," the robot said.

Morris' mind was numb; it refused to respond. What was a *fasrad?* There was something dreamlike and nightmarish going on. He struggled to get his mind and body together. "A what?" he croaked.

"A fasrad." The robot made no effort to explain. It regarded him without emotion, as if it was not its responsibility to explain anything. "It will take only a moment."

"I —" Morris began. He moved back, out of the wind. And the robot, without change of expression, glided past him and into the house.

"Thank you," it said. It halted in the middle of the living room. "Would you call your wife, please? I would like to show her the fasrad, also."

"Sally," Morris muttered helplessly. "Come here."

Sally swept breathlessly into the living room, her breasts quivering with excitement. "What is it? Oh!" She saw the robot and halted uncertainly. "Ed, did you order something? Are we buying something?"

“Good evening,” the robot said to her. “I am going to show you the fasrad. Please be seated. On the couch, if you will. Both together.”

Sally sat down expectantly, her cheeks flushed, eyes bright with wonder and bewilderment. Numbly, Ed seated himself beside her. “Look,” he muttered thickly. “What the hell is a fasrad? *What’s going on?* I don’t want to buy anything!”

“What is your name?” the robot asked him.

“Morris.” He almost choked. “Ed Morris.”

The robot turned to Sally. “Mrs. Morris.” It bowed slightly. “I’m glad to meet you, Mr. and Mrs. Morris. You are the first persons in your neighborhood to see the fasrad. This is the initial demonstration in this area.” Its cold eyes swept the room. “Mr. Morris, you are employed, I assume. Where are you employed?”

“He works on Ganymede,” Sally said dutifully, like a little girl in school. “For the Terran Metals Development Co.”

The robot digested this information. “A fasrad will be of value to you.” It eyed Sally. “What do you do?”

“I’m a tape transcriber at Histo-Research.”

“A fasrad will be of no value in your professional work, but it will be helpful here in the home.” It picked up a table in its powerful steel grippers. “For example, sometimes an attractive piece of furniture is damaged by a clumsy guest.” The robot smashed the table to bits; fragments of wood and plastic rained down. “A fasrad is needed.”

Morris leaped helplessly to his feet. He was powerless to halt events; a numbing weight hung over him, as the robot tossed the fragments of table

away and selected a heavy floor lamp.

“Oh dear,” Sally gasped. “That’s my best lamp.”

“When a fasrad is possessed, there is nothing to fear.” The robot seized the lamp and twisted it grotesquely. It ripped the shade, smashed the bulbs, then threw away the remnants. “A situation of this kind can occur from some violent explosion, such as an H-Bomb.”

“For God’s sake,” Morris muttered. “We —”

“An H-Bomb attack may never occur,” the robot continued, “but in such an event a fasrad is indispensable.” It knelt down and pulled an intricate tube from its waist. Aiming the tube at the floor it atomized a hole five feet in diameter. It stepped back from the yawning pocket. “I have not extended this tunnel, but you can see a fasrad would save your life in case of attack.”

The word *attack* seemed to set off a new train of reactions in its metal brain.

“Sometimes a thug or hood will attack a person at night,” it continued. Without warning it whirled and drove its fist through the wall. A section of the wall collapsed in a heap of powder and debris. “That takes care of the thug.” The robot straightened out and peered around the room. “Often you are too tired in the evening to manipulate the buttons on the stove.” It strode into the kitchen and began punching the stove controls; immense quantities of food spilled in all directions.

“Stop!” Sally cried. “Get away from my stove!”

“You may be too weary to run water for your bath.” The robot tripped the controls of the tub and water poured down. “Or you may wish to go right to bed.” It yanked the bed from its concealment and threw it flat. Sally retreated in fright as the robot advanced toward her. “Sometimes after a

hard day at work you are too tired to remove your clothing. In that event —”

“Get out of here!” Morris shouted at it. “Sally, run and get the cops. The thing’s gone crazy. *Hurry.”*

“The fasrad is a necessity in all modern homes,” the robot continued. “For example, an appliance may break down. The fasrad repairs it instantly.” It seized the automatic humidity control and tore the wiring and replaced it on the wall. “Sometimes you would prefer not to go to work. The fasrad is permitted by law to occupy your position for a consecutive period not to exceed ten days. If, after that period —”

“Good God,” Morris said, as understanding finally came. “You’re the fasrad.”

“That’s right,” the robot agreed. “Fully Automatic Self-Regulating Android (Domestic). There is also the fasrac (Construction), the fasram (Managerial), the fasras (Soldier), and the fasrab (Bureaucrat). I am designed for home use.”

“You —” Sally gasped. “You’re for sale. You’re selling yourself.”

“I am demonstrating myself,” the fasrad, the robot, answered. Its impassive metal eyes were fixed intently on Morris as it continued, “I am sure, Mr. Morris, you would like to own me. I am reasonably priced and fully guaranteed. A full book of instructions is included. I cannot conceive of taking *no* for an answer.”

At half past twelve, Ed Morris still sat at the foot of the bed, one shoe on, the other in his hand. He gazed vacantly ahead. He said nothing.

“For heaven’s sake,” Sally complained. “Finish untying that knot and get into bed; you have to be up at five-thirty.”

Morris fooled aimlessly with the shoelace. After a while he dropped the shoe and tugged at the other one. The house was cold and silent. Outside, the dismal night-wind whipped and lashed at the cedars that grew along the side of the building. Sally lay curled up beneath the radiant-lens, a cigarette between her lips, enjoying the warmth and half-dozing.

In the living room stood the fasrad. It hadn't left. It was still there, was waiting for Morris to buy it.

"Come on!" Sally said sharply. "What's wrong with you? It fixed all the things it broke; it was just demonstrating itself." She sighed drowsily. "It certainly gave me a scare. I thought something had gone wrong with it. They certainly had an inspiration, sending it around to sell itself to people."

Morris said nothing.

Sally rolled over on her stomach and languidly stubbed out her cigarette. "That's not so much, is it? Ten thousand gold units, and if we get our friends to buy one we get a five per cent commission. All we have to do is show it. It isn't as if we had to *sell* it. It sells itself." She giggled. "They always wanted a product that sold itself, didn't they?"

Morris untied the knot in his shoelace. He slid his shoe back on and tied it tight.

"What are you doing?" Sally demanded angrily. "You come to bed!" She sat up furiously, as Morris left the room and moved slowly down the hall. "Where are you going?"

In the living room, Morris switched on the light and sat down facing the fasrad. "Can you hear me?" he said.

"Certainly," the fasrad answered. "I'm never inoperative. Sometimes an emergency occurs at night: a child is sick or an accident takes place. You have no children as yet, but in the event —"

“Shut up,” Morris said, “I don’t want to hear you.”

“You asked me a question. Self-regulating androids are plugged in to a central information exchange. Sometimes a person wishes immediate information; the fasrad is always ready to answer any theoretical or factual inquiry. Anything not metaphysical.”

Morris picked up the book of instructions and thumbed it. The fasrad did thousands of things; it never wore out; it was never at a loss; it couldn’t make a mistake. He threw the book away. “I’m not going to buy you,” he said to it. “Never. Not in a million years.”

“Oh, yes you are,” the fasrad corrected. “This is an opportunity you can’t afford to miss.” There was calm, metallic confidence in its voice. “You can’t turn me down, Mr. Morris. A fasrad is an indispensable necessity in the modern home.”

“Get out of here,” Morris said evenly. “Get out of my house and don’t come back.”

“I’m not your fasrad to order around. Until you’ve purchased me at the regular list price, I’m responsible only to Self-Regulating Android Inc. Their instructions were to the contrary; I’m to remain with you until you buy me.”

“Suppose I never buy you?” Morris demanded, but in his heart ice formed even as he asked. Already he felt the cold terror of the answer that was coming; there could be no other.

“I’ll continue to remain with you,” the fasrad said, “eventually you’ll buy me.” It plucked some withered roses from a vase on the mantel and dropped them into its disposal slot. “You will see more and more situations in which a fasrad is indispensible. Eventually you’ll wonder how you ever existed without one.”

“Is there anything you can’t do?”

“Oh, yes; there’s a great deal I can’t do. But I can do anything *you* can do — and considerably better.”

Morris let out his breath slowly. “I’d be insane to buy you.”

“You’ve got to buy me,” the impassive voice answered. The fasrad extended a hollow pipe and began cleaning the carpet. “I am useful in all situations. Notice how fluffy and free of dust this rug is.” It withdrew the pipe and extended another. Morris coughed and staggered quickly away; clouds of white particles billowed out and filled every part of the room.

“I am spraying for moths,” the fasrad explained.

The white cloud turned to an ugly blue-black. The room faded into ominous darkness; the fasrad was a dim shape moving methodically about in the center. Presently the cloud lifted and the furniture emerged.

“I sprayed for harmful bacteria,” the fasrad said.

It painted the walls of the room and constructed new furniture to go with them. It reinforced the ceiling in the bathroom. It increased the number of heat-vents from the furnace. It put in new electrical wiring. It tore out all the fixtures in the kitchen and assembled more modern ones. It examined Morris’ financial accounts and computed his income tax for the following year. It sharpened all the pencils; it caught hold of his wrist and quickly diagnosed his high blood-pressure as psychosomatic.

“You’ll feel better after you’ve turned responsibility over to me,” it explained. It threw out some old soup Sally had been saving. “Danger of botulism,” it told him. “Your wife is sexually attractive, but not capable of a high order of intellectualization.”

Morris went to the closet and got his coat.

“Where are you going?” the fasrad asked.

“To the office.”

“At this time of night?”

Morris glanced briefly into the bedroom. Sally was sound asleep under the soothing radiant-lens. Her slim body was rosy pink and healthy, her face free of worry. He closed the front door and hurried down the steps into the darkness. Cold night wind slashed at him as he approached the parking lot. His little commute ship was parked with hundreds of others; a quarter sent the attendant robot obediently after it.

In ten minutes he was on his way to Ganymede.

The fasrad boarded his ship when he stopped at Mars to refuel.

“Apparently you don’t understand,” the fasrad said. “My instructions are to demonstrate myself until you’re satisfied. As yet, you’re not wholly convinced; further demonstration is necessary.” It passed an intricate web over the controls of the ship until all the dials and meters were in adjustment. “You should have more frequent servicing.”

It retired to the rear to examine the drive jets. Morris numbly signalled the attendant, and the ship was released from the fuel pumps. He gained speed and the small sandy planet fell behind. Ahead, Jupiter loomed.

“Your jets aren’t in good repair,” the fasrad said, emerging from the rear. “I don’t like that knock to the main brake drive. As soon as you land I’ll make extensive repair.”

“The Company doesn’t mind your doing favors for me?” Morris asked, with bitter sarcasm.

“The Company considers me your fasrad. An invoice will be mailed to you at the end of the month.” The robot whipped out a pen and a pad of forms. “I’ll explain the four easy-payment plans. Ten thousand gold units cash means a three per cent discount. In addition, a number of household items may be traded in — items you won’t have further need for. If you wish to divide the purchase in four parts, the first is due at once, and the last in ninety days.”

“I always pay cash,” Morris muttered. He was carefully resetting the route positions on the control board.

“There’s no carrying charge for the ninety day plan. For the six month plan there’s a six per cent per annum charge which will amount to approximately —” It broke off. “We’ve changed course.”

“We’ve left the official traffic lane.” The fasrad stuck its pen and pad away and hurried to the control board. “What are you doing? There’s a two unit fine for this.”

Morris ignored it. He hung on grimly to the controls and kept his eyes on the viewscreen. The ship was gaining speed rapidly. Warning buoys sounded angrily as he shot past them and into the bleak darkness of space beyond. In a few seconds they had left all traffic behind. They were alone, shooting rapidly away from Jupiter, out into deep space.

The fasrad computed the trajectory. “We’re moving out of the solar system. Toward Centaurus.”

“You guessed it.”

“Hadn’t you better call your wife?”

Morris grunted and notched the drive bar farther up. The ship bucked and pitched, then managed to right itself. The jets began to whine

ominously. Indicators showed the main turbines were beginning to heat. He ignored them and threw on the emergency fuel supply.

“I’ll call Mrs. Morris,” the fasrad offered. “We’ll be beyond range in a short while.”

“Don’t bother.”

“She’ll worry.” The fasrad hurried to the back and examined the jets again. It popped back into the cabin buzzing with alarm. “Mr. Morris, this ship is not equipped for intersystem travel. It’s a Class D four-shaft domestic model for home consumption only. It was never made to stand this velocity.”

“To get to Proxima,” Morris answered, “we need this velocity.”

The fasrad connected its power cables to the control board. “I can take some of the strain off the wiring system. But unless you rev her back to normal I can’t be responsible for the deterioration of the jets.”

“The hell with the jets.”

The fasrad was silent. It was listening intently to the growing whine under them. The whole ship shuddered violently. Bits of paint drifted down. The floor was hot from the grinding shafts. Morris’ foot stayed on the throttle. The ship gained more velocity as Sol fell behind. They were out of the charted area. Sol receded rapidly.

“It’s too late to vid your wife,” the fasrad said. “There are three emergency-rockets in the stern; if you want, I’ll fire them off in the hope of attracting a passing military transport.”

“Why?”

“They can take us in tow and return us to the Sol system. There’s a six hundred gold unit fine, but under the circumstances it seems to me the best policy.”

Morris turned his back to the fasrad and jammed down the throttle with all his weight. The whine had grown to a violent roar. Instruments smashed and cracked. Fuses blew up and down the board. The lights dimmed, faded, then reluctantly came back.

“Mr. Morris,” the fasrad said, “you must prepare for death. The statistical probabilities of turbine explosion are seventy-thirty. I’ll do what I can, but the danger-point has already passed.”

Morris returned to the viewscreen. For a time he gazed hungrily up at the growing dot that was the twin star Centaurus. “They look all right, don’t they? Prox is the important one. Twenty planets.” He examined the wildly fluttering instruments. “How are the jets holding up? I can’t tell from these; most of them are burned out.”

The fasrad hesitated. It started to speak, then changed its mind. “I’ll go back and examine them,” it said. It moved to the rear of the ship and disappeared down the short ramp into the thundering, vibrating engine chamber.

Morris leaned over and put out his cigarette. He waited a moment longer, then reached out and yanked the drives full up, the last possible notch on the board.

The explosion tore the ship in half. Sections of hull hurtled around him. He was lifted weightless and slammed into the control board. Metal and plastic rained down on him. Flashing incandescent points winked, faded, and finally died into silence, and there was nothing but cold ash.

The dull *swish-swish* of emergency air-pumps brought consciousness back. He was pinned under the wreckage of the control board; one arm was

broken and bent under him. He tried to move his legs but there was no sensation below his waist.

The splintered debris that had been his ship was still hurling toward Centaurus. Hull-sealing equipment was feebly trying to patch the gaping holes. Automatic temperature and grav feeds were thumping spasmodically from self-contained batteries. In the viewscreen the vast flaming bulk of the twin suns grew quietly, inexorably.

He was glad. In the silence of the ruined ship he lay buried beneath the debris, gratefully watching the growing bulk. It was a beautiful sight. He had wanted to see it for a long time. There it was, coming closer each moment. In a day or two the ship would plunge into the fiery mass and be consumed. But he could enjoy this interval; there was nothing to disturb his happiness — He thought about Sally, sound asleep under the radiant-lens. Would Sally have liked Proxima? Probably not. Probably she would have wanted to go back home as soon as possible. This was something he had to enjoy alone. This was for him only. A vast peace descended over him. He could lie here without stirring, and the flaming magnificence would come nearer and nearer…

A sound. From the heaps of fused wreckage something was rising. A twisted, dented shape dimly visible in the flickering glare of the viewscreen. Morris managed to turn his head.

The fasrad staggered to a standing position. Most of its trunk was gone, smashed and broken away. It tottered, then pitched forward on its face with a grinding crash. Slowly it inched its way toward him, then settled to a dismal halt a few feet off. Gears whirred creakily. Relays popped open and shut. Vague, aimless life animated its devastated hulk.

“Good evening,” its shrill, metallic voice grated.

Morris screamed. He tried to move his body but the ruined beams held him tight. He shrieked and shouted and tried to crawl away from it. He spat and wailed and wept.

“I would like to show you a fasrad,” the metallic voice continued. “Would you call your wife, please? I would like to show her a fasrad, too.”

“Get away!” Morris screamed. “Get away from me!”

“Good evening,” the fasrad continued, like a broken tape. “Good evening. Please be seated. I am happy to meet you. What is your name? Thank you. You are the first persons in your neighborhood to see the fasrad. Where are you employed?”

Its dead eye-lenses gaped at him empty and vacant.

“Please be seated,” it said again. “This will take only a second. Only a second. This demonstration will take only a —”

Shell Game

A sound awoke O’Keefe instantly. He threw back his covers, slid from the cot, grabbed his B-pistol from the wall and, with his foot, smashed the alarm box. High frequency waves tripped emergency bells throughout the camp. As O’Keefe burst from his house, lights already flickered on every side.

“Where?” Fisher demanded shrilly. He appeared beside O’Keefe, still in his pajamas, grubby-faced with sleep.

“Over to the right.” O’Keefe leaped aside for a massive cannon being rolled from its underground storage-chambers. Soldiers were appearing among the night-clad figures. To the right lay the black bog of mists and obese foliage, ferns and pulpy onions, sunk in the half-liquid ooze that made up the surface of Betelgeuse II. Nocturnal phosphorescence danced and flitted over the bog, ghostly yellow lights snapped in the thick darkness.

“I figure,” Horstokowski said, “they came in close to the road, but not actually on it. There’s a shoulder fifty feet on each side, where the bog has piled up. That’s why our radar’s silent.”

An immense mechanical fusing “bug” was eating its way into the mud and shifting water of the bog, leaving behind a trail of hard, smoked surface. The vegetation and the rotting roots and dead leaves were sucked up and efficiently cleared away.

“What did you see?” Portbane asked O’Keefe.

“I didn’t see anything. I was sound asleep. But I *heard* them.”

“Doing what?’

“They were getting ready to pump nerve gas into my house. I heard them unreeling the hose from portable drums and uncapping the pressure tanks. But, by God, I was out of the house before they could get the joints leak-tight!”

Daniels hurried up. “You say it’s a gas attack?” He fumbled for the gas mask at his belt. “Don’t stand there — get your masks on!”

“They didn’t get their equipment going,” Silberman said. “O’Keefe gave the alarm in time. They retreated back to the bog.”

“You’re sure?” Daniels demanded.

“You don’t smell anything, do you?”

“No,” Daniels admitted. “But the odorless type is the most deadly. And you don’t know you’ve been gassed till it’s too late.” He put on his gas mask, just to be sure.

A few women appeared by the rows of houses — slim, large-eyed shapes in the flickering glare of the emergency searchlights. Some children crept cautiously after them.

Silberman and Horstokowski moved over in the shadows by the heavy cannon.

“Interesting,” Horstokowski said. “Third gas attack this month. Plus two tries to wire bomb terminals within the camp site. They’re stepping it up.”

“You have it all figured out, don’t you?”

“I don’t have to wait for the composite to see we’re getting it heavier all the time.” Horstokowski peered warily around, then pulled Silberman close. “Maybe there’s a reason why the radar screen didn’t react. It’s supposed to get everything, even knocker-bats.”

“But if they came in along the shoulder, like you said —”

“I just said that as a plant. *There’s somebody waving them in, setting up interference for the radar.”*

“You mean one of us?”

Horstokowski was intently watching Fisher through the moist night gloom. Fisher had moved carefully to the edge of the road, where the hard surface ended and the slimy, scorched bog began. He was squatting down and rooting in the ooze.

“What’s he doing?” Horstokowski demanded.

“Picking up something,” Silberman said indifferently. “Why not? He’s supposed to be looking around, isn’t he?”

“Watch,” Horstokowski warned. “When he comes back, he’s going to pretend nothing happened.”

Presently, Fisher returned, walking rapidly and rubbing the muck from his hands.

Horstokowski intercepted him. “What’d you find?”

“Me?” Fisher blinked. “I didn’t find anything.”

“Don’t kid me! You were down on your hands and knees, grubbing in the bog.”

“I — thought I saw something metal, that’s all.”

A vast inner excitement radiated through Horstokowski. He had been right.

“Come on!” he shouted. “What’d you find?”

“I thought it was a gas pipe,” Fisher muttered. “But it was only a root. A big, wet root.”

There was a tense silence.

“Search him,” Portbane ordered.

Two soldiers grabbed Fisher. Silberman and Daniels quickly searched him.

They spilled out his belt pistol, knife, emergency whistle, automatic relay checker, Geiger counter, pulse tab, medical kit and identification papers. There was nothing else.

The soldiers let him go, disappointed, and Fisher sullenly collected his things.

“No, he didn’t find anything,” Portbane stated. “Sorry, Fisher. We have to be careful. We have to watch all the time, as long as they’re out there, plotting and conspiring against us.”

Silberman and Horstokowski exchanged glances, then moved quietly away.

“I think I get it,” Silberman said softly.

“Sure,” Horstokowski answered. “He *hid* something. We’ll dig up that section of bog he was poking around in. I think maybe well find something interesting.” He hunched his shoulders combatively. “I knew somebody was working for them, here in the camp. A spy for Terra.”

Silberman started. “Terra? Is that who’s attacking us?”

“Of course that’s who.”

There was a puzzled look on Silberman’s face.

“Seemed to me we’re fighting somebody else.”

Horstokowski was outraged.

“For instance?”

Silberman shook his head. “I don’t know. I didn’t think about who so much as what to do about it. I guess I just took it for granted they were aliens.”

“And what do you think those Terran monkey men are?” Horstokowski challenged.

The weekly Pattern Conference brought together the nine leaders of the camp in their reinforced underground conference chamber. Armed guards protected the entrance, which was sealed tight as soon as the last leader had been examined, checked over and finally passed.

Domgraf-Schwach, the conference chairman, sat attentively in his deep chair, one hand on the Pattern composite, the other on the switch that could instantly catapult him from the room and into a special compartment, safe from attack. Portbane was making his routine inspection of the chamber, examining each chair and desk for scanning eyes. Daniels sat with eyes fixed on his Geiger counter. Silberman was completely encased in an elaborate steel and plastic suit, configured with wiring, from which continual whirrings came.

“What in God’s name is that suit of armor?” Domgraf-Schwach asked angrily. “Take it off so we can see you.”

“Nuts to you,” Silberman snapped, his voice muted by his intricate hull. “I’m wearing this from now on. Last night, somebody tried to jab me with bacteria-impregnated needles.”

Lanoir, who was half-dozing at his place, came alive. “Bacteria-impregnated needles?” He leaped up and hurried over to Silberman. “Let me ask you if —”

“Keep away from me!” Silberman shouted. “If you come any closer, I’ll electrocute you!”

“The attempt I reported last week,” Lanoir panted excitedly, “when they tried to poison the water supply with metallic salts. It occurred to me their next method would be bacterial wastes, filterable virus we couldn’t detect until actual outbreak of disease.” From his pocket, he yanked a bottle and shook out a handful of white capsules. One after another, he popped the capsules into his mouth.

Every man in the room was protected in some fashion. Each chose whatever apparatus conformed to his individual experience. But the totality of defense-systems was integrated in the general Pattern planning. The only man who didn’t seem busy with a device was Tate. He sat pale and tense, but otherwise unoccupied.

Domgraf-Schwach made a mental note — Tate’s confidence-level was unusually high. It suggested he somehow felt safe from attack.

“No talking,” Domgraf-Schwach said. “Time to start.”

He had been chosen as chairman by the turn of a wheel. There was no possibility of subversion under such a system. In an isolated, autonomous

colony of sixty men and fifty women, such a random method was necessary.

“Daniels will read the week’s Pattern composite,” Domgraf-Schwach ordered.

“Why?” Portbane demanded bluntly. “We were the ones who put it together. We all know what’s in it.”

“For the same reason it’s always read,” Silberman answered. “So we’ll know it wasn’t tampered with.”

“Just the summation!” Horstokowski said loudly. “I don’t want to stay down here in this vault any longer than I have to.”

“Afraid somebody’ll fill up the passage?” Daniels jeered. “There are half a dozen emergency escape exits. You ought to know — you insisted on every one of them.”

“Read the summation,” Lanoir demanded.

Daniels cleared his throat. “During the last seven days, there were eleven overt attacks in all. The main attack was on our new class-A bridge network, which was sabotaged and wrecked. The struts were weakened and the plastic mix that served as base material was diluted, so that when the very first convoy of trucks passed over it, the whole thing collapsed.”

“We know that,” Portbane said gloomily.

“Loss consisted of six lives and considerable equipment. Troops scoured the area for a whole day, but the saboteurs managed to escape. Shortly after this attack, it was discovered that the water supply was poisoned with metallic salts. The wells were therefore filled and new ones drilled. Now all our water passes through filter and analysis systems.”

“I boil mine,” Lanoir added feelingly.

“It’s agreed by everyone that the frequency and severity of attacks have been stepped up.” Daniels indicated the massive wall charts and graphs. “Without our bomb-proof screen and our constant direction network, we’d be overwhelmed tonight. The real question is — *who are our attackers*?”

“Terrans,” Horstokowski said.

Tate shook his head. “Terrans, hell! What would monkey men be doing out this far?”

“We’re out this far, aren’t we?” Lanoir retorted. “And we were Terrans once.”

“Never!” Fisher shouted. “Maybe we lived on Terra, but we aren’t Terrans. We’re a superior mutant race.”

“Then who are they?” Horstokowski insisted.

“They’re other survivors from the ship,” Tate said.

“How do you know?” asked Silberman. “Have you ever seen them?’

“*We salvaged no lifeboats, remember?* They must have blasted off in them.”

“If they were isolated survivors,” O’Keefe objected, “they wouldn’t have the equipment and weapons and machines they’re using. They’re a trained, integrated force. We haven’t been able to defeat them or even kill any of them in five years. That certainly shows their strength.”

“We haven’t tried to defeat them,” Fisher said. “We’ve only tried to defend ourselves.”

A sudden tense silence fell over the nine men.

“You mean the ship,” Horstokowski said.

“It’ll be up out of the bog soon,” Tate replied. “And then we’ll have something to show them — something they’ll remember.”

“Good God!” Lanoir exclaimed, disgusted. “The ship’s a wreck — the meteor completely smashed it. What happens when we do get it up? We can’t operate it unless we can completely rebuild it.”

“If the monkey men could build the thing,” Portbane said, “we can repair it. We have the tools and machinery.”

“And we’ve finally located the control cabin,” O’Keefe pointed out. “I see no reason why we can’t raise it.”

There was an abrupt change of expression on Lanoir’s face. “All right, I withdraw my objections. Let’s get it up.”

“What’s your motive?” Daniels yelled excitedly. “You’re trying to put something over on us!”

“He’s planning something,” Fisher furiously agreed. “Don’t listen to him. Leave the damn thing down there!”

“Too late for that,” O’Keefe said. “It’s been rising for weeks.”

“You’re in with him!” Daniels screeched. “Something’s being put over on us.”

The ship was a dripping, corroded ruin. Slime poured from it as the magnetic grapples dragged it from the bog and onto the hard surface that the fusing bugs had laid down.

The bugs burned a hard track through the bog, out to the control cabin. While the lift suspended the cabin, heavy reinforced plastic beams were slid under it. Tangled weeds, matted like ancient hair, covered the globular cabin in the midday sun, the first light that had struck it in five years.

“In you go,” Domgraf-Schwach said eagerly.

Portbane and Lanoir advanced over the fused surface to the moored control cabin. Their handlights flashed ominously yellow around the steaming walls and encrusted controls. Livid eels twisted and convulsed in the thick pools underfoot. The cabin was a smashed, twisted ruin. Lanoir, who was first, motioned Portbane impatiently after him.

“*You* look at these controls — you’re the engineer.”

Portbane set down his light on a sloping heap of rusted metal and sloshed through the knee-deep rubbish to the demolished control panel. It was a maze of fused, buckled machinery. He squatted down in front of it and began tearing away the pitted guard-plates.

Lanoir pushed open a supply closet and brought down metal-packed audio and video tapes. He eagerly spilled open a can of the video and held a handful of frames to the flickering light. “Here’s the ship’s data. Now I’ll be able to prove there was nobody but us aboard.”

O’Keefe appeared at the jagged doorway. “How’s it coming?”

Lanoir elbowed past him and out on the support boards. He deposited a load of tape-cans and returned to the drenched cabin. “Find anything on the controls?” he asked Portbane.

“Strange,” Portbane murmured.

“What’s the matter?” Tate demanded. ‘Too badly wrecked?”

“There are lots of wires and relays. Plenty of meters and power circuits and switches. But no controls to operate them.”

Lanoir hurried over. “There must be!”

“For repairs, you have to remove all these plates — practically dismantle the works to even see them. Nobody could sit here and control the ship. There’s nothing but a smooth, sealed shell.”

“Maybe this wasn’t the control cabin,” Fisher offered.

“This is the steering mechanism — no doubt about that.” Portbane pulled out a heap of charred wiring. “But all this was self-contained. They’re robot controls. Automatic.”

They looked at each other.

“Then we were prisoners,” Tate said, dazed.

“Whose?” Fisher asked baffledly.

“The Terrans!” Lanoir said.

“I don’t get it,” Fisher muttered vaguely. “We planned the whole flight — didn’t we? We broke out of Ganymede and got away.”

“Get the tapes going,” Portbane said to Lanoir. “Let’s see what’s in them.”

Daniels snapped the vidtape scanner off and raised the light.

“Well,” he said, “you saw for yourselves this was a hospital ship. It carried no crew. It was directed from a central guide-beam at Jupiter. The

beam carried it from the Sol System here, where, because of a mechanical error, a meteor penetrated the protection screen and the ship crashed."

"And if it hadn't crashed?" Domgraf-Schwach asked faintly.

'Then we would have been taken to the main hospital at Fomalhaut IV."

"Play the last tape again," Tate urged.

The wall-speaker spluttered and then said smoothly: "The distinction between paranoids and paranoiac syndromes in other psychotic personality disorders must be borne in mind when dealing with these patients. The paranoid retains his general personality structure unimpaired. Outside of the region of his complex, he is logical, rational, even brilliant. He can be talked to — he can discuss himself — he is aware of his surroundings.

"The paranoid differs from other psychotics in that he remains actively oriented to the outside world. He differs from so-called normal personality types in that he has a set of fixed ideas, false postulates from which he has relentlessly constructed an elaborate system of beliefs, logical and consistent with these false postulates."

Shakily, Daniels interrupted the tape. "These tapes were for the hospital authorities on Fomalhaut IV. Locked in a supply closet in the control cabin. The control cabin itself was sealed off from the rest of the ship. None of us was able to enter it."

"The paranoid is totally rigid," the calm voice of the Terran doctor continued. "His fixed ideas cannot be shaken. They dominate his life. He logically weaves all events, all persons, all chance remarks and happenings, into his system. He is convinced the world is plotting against him — that he is a person of unusual importance and ability against whom endless machinations are directed. To thwart these plots, the paranoid goes to infinite lengths to protect himself. He repeatedly vidtapes the authorities, constantly moves from place to place and, in the dangerous final phases, may even become —"

Silberman snapped it off savagely and the chamber was silent. The nine leaders of the camp sat unmoving in their places.

“We’re a bunch of nuts,” Tate said finally. “A shipload of psychos who got wrecked by a chance meteor.”

“Don’t kid yourself,” Horstokowski snapped. “There wasn’t anything chance about that meteor.”

Fisher giggled hysterically. “More paranoid talk. Good God, all these attacks — hallucinations — all in our minds!”

Lanoir poked vaguely at the piles of tape. “What are we to believe? *Are there any attackers?”*

“We’ve been defending ourselves against them for five years!” Portbane retorted. “Isn’t that proof enough?”

“Have you ever seen them?” Fisher asked slyly.

“We’re up against the best agents in the Galaxy. Terran shock troops and military spies, carefully trained in subversion and sabotage. They’re too clever to show themselves.”

“They wrecked the bridge-system,” O’Keefe said. “It’s true we didn’t see them, but the bridge is sure as hell in ruins.”

“Maybe it was badly built,” Fisher pointed out. “Maybe it just collapsed.”

“Things don’t ‘just collapse’! There’s a reason for all these things that have been happening.”

“Like what?” Tate demanded.

“Weekly poison gas attacks,” Portbane said. “Metallic wastes in the water supply, to name only two.”

“And bacteriological crystals,” Daniels added.

“Maybe none of these things exist,” Lanoir argued. “But how are we to prove it? If we’re all insane, *how would we know?”*

“There are over a hundred of us,” Domgraf-Schwach said. “We’ve all experienced these attacks. Isn’t that proof enough?”

“A myth can be picked up by a whole society, believed and taught to the next generation. Gods, fairies, witches — believing a thing doesn’t make it true. For centuries, Terrans believed the Earth was flat.”

“If all foot-rulers grow to thirteen inches,” Fisher asked, “how would anybody know? One of them would have to stay twelve inches long, a nonvariable, a constant. We’re a bunch of inaccurate rulers, each thirteen inches long. We need one nonparanoid for comparison.”

“Or maybe this is all part of their strategy,” Silberman said. “Maybe they rigged up that control cabin and planted those tapes there.”

“This ought to be no different from trying to test any belief,” Portbane explained. “What’s the characteristic of a scientific test?”

“It can be duplicated,” Fisher said promptly. “Look, we’re going around in circles. *We’re trying to measure ourselves.* You can’t take your ruler, either twelve inches or thirteen inches long, and ask it to measure itself. No instrument can test its own accuracy.”

“Wrong,” Portbane answered calmly. “I can put together a valid, objective test.”

“There’s no such test!” Tate shouted excitedly.

“There sure as hell is. And inside of a week, I’ll have it set up.”

“Gas!” the soldier shouted. On all sides, sirens wailed into life. Women and children scrambled for their masks. Heavy-duty cannon rumbled up from subsurface chambers and took up positions. Along the perimeter of the bog, the fusing bugs were searing away a ribbon of muck. Searchlights played out into the fern-thick darkness.

Portbane snapped off the cock of the steel tank and signaled the workmen. The tank was rolled quickly away from the sea of mud and seared weeds.

“All right,” Portbane gasped. “Get it below.”

He emerged in the subsurface chamber as the cylinder was being rolled into position.

“That cylinder,” Portbane said, “should contain hydrocyanic vapor. It’s a sampling made at the site of the attack.”

“This is useless,” Fisher complained. “They’re attacking and here we stand!”

Portbane signaled the workmen and they began laying out the test apparatus. “There will be two samples, precipitates of different vapors, each clearly marked and labeled A and B. One comes from the cylinder filled at the scene of the attack. The other is condensed from air taken out of this room.”

“Suppose we describe both as negative?” Silberman asked worriedly. “Won’t that throw your test off?”

“Then we’ll take more tests. After a couple of months, if we still haven’t got anything but negative findings, then the attack hypothesis is destroyed.”

“We may see both as positive,” Tate said, perplexed.

“In that case, we’re dead right now. If we see both samples as positive, I think the case for the paranoid hypothesis has been proved.”

After a moment, Domgraf-Schwach reluctantly agreed. “One is the control. If we maintain that it isn’t possible to get a control sample that is free of hydrocyanic acid…”

“Pretty damn slick,” O’Keefe admitted. “You start from the one known factor — our own existence. We can’t very well doubt *that*.”

“Here are all the choices,” Portbane said. “Both positive means we’re psychotic. Both negative means either the attack was a false alarm or there are no attackers. One positive and one negative would indicate there are real attackers, that we’re fully sane and rational.” He glanced around at the camp leads. *“But we’ll all have to agree which sample is which.”*

“Our reactions will be recorded secretly?” Tate asked.

“Tabulated and punched by the mechanical eye. Tallied by machinery. Each of us will make an individual discrimination.”

After a pause, Fisher said, “I’ll try it.” He came forward, leaned over the colorimeter and studied the two samples intently. He alternated them for a time and then firmly grabbed the check-stylus.

“You’re sure?” Domgraf-Schwach asked. “You really know which is the negative control sample?”

“I know.” Fisher noted his findings on the punch sheet and moved away.

“I’m next,” Tate said, impatiently pushing up. “Let’s get this over with.”

One by one, the men examined the two samples, recorded their findings, and then moved off to stand waiting uneasily.

“All right,” Portbane said finally. “I’m the last one.” He peered down briefly, scribbled his results, then pushed the equipment away. “Give me the readings,” he told the workmen by the scanner.

A moment later, the findings were flashed up for everyone to see.

FisherA

TateA

O’KeefeB

HorstokowskiB

SilbermanB

DanielsB

PortbaneA

Domgraf-SchwachB

LanoirA

“I’ll be damned,” Silberman said softly. “As simple as that. We’re paranoids.”

“You cluck!” Tate shouted at Horstokowski. “It was A, not B! How the hell could you get it wrong?”

“B was as bright as a searchlight!” Domgraf-Schwach answered furiously. “A was completely colorless!”

O’Keefe pushed forward. “Which was it, Portbane? Which was the positive sample?”

“I don’t know,” Portbane confessed. “How could any of us be sure?”

The buzzer on Domgraf-Schwach’s desk clicked and he snapped on the vidscreen.

The face of a soldier-operator appeared. “The attack’s over, sir. We drove them away.”

Domgraf-Schwach smiled ironically. “Catch any of them?”

“No, sir. They slipped back into the bog. I think we hit a couple, though. We’ll go out tomorrow and try to find the corpses.”

“You think you’ll find them?”

“Well, the bog usually swallows them up. But maybe this time —”

“All right,” Domgraf-Schwach interrupted. “If this turns out to be an exception, let me know.” He broke the circuit.

“Now what?” Daniels inquired icily.

“There’s no point in continuing work on the ship,” O’Keefe said. “Why waste our time bombing empty bogs?”

“I suggest we keep working on the ship,” Tate contradicted.

“Why?” O’Keefe asked.

“So we can head for Fomalhaut and give ourselves up to the hospital station.”

Silberman stared at him incredulously. “Turn ourselves in? Why not stay here? We’re not harming anybody.”

“No, not yet. It’s the future I’m thinking of, centuries from now.”

“We’ll be dead.”

“Those of us in this room, sure, but what about our descendants?”

“He’s right,” Lanoir conceded. “Eventually our descendants will fill this whole solar system. Sooner or later, our ships might spread over the Galaxy.” He tried to smile, but his muscles would not respond. “The tapes point out how tenacious paranoids are. They cling fanatically to their fixed beliefs. If our descendants expand into Terran regions, there’ll be a fight and we might win because we’re more one-track. We would never deviate.”

“Fanatics,” Daniels whispered.

“We’ll have to keep this information from the rest of the camp,” O’Keefe said.

“Absolutely,” Fisher agreed. “We’ll have to keep them thinking the ship is for H-bomb attacks. Otherwise, we’ll have one hell of a situation on our hands.”

They began moving numbly toward the sealed door.

“Wait a minute,” Domgraf-Schwach said urgently. “The two workmen.” He started back, while some of them went out into the corridor, the rest back toward their seats.

And then it happened.

Silberman fired first. Fisher screamed as half of him vanished in swirling particles of radioactive ash. Silberman dropped to one knee and fired up at Tate. Tate leaned back and brought out his own B-pistol. Daniels stepped from the path of Lanoir's beam. It missed him and struck the first row of seats.

Lanoir calmly crept along the wall through the billowing clouds of smoke. A figure loomed ahead; he raised his gun and fired. The figure fell to one side and fired back. Lanoir staggered and collapsed like a deflated balloon and Silberman hurried on.

At his desk, Domgraf-Schwach was groping wildly for his escape button. His fingers touched it, but as he depressed the stud, a blast from Portbane's pistol removed the top of his head. The lifeless corpse stood momentarily, then was whisked to "safety" by the intricate apparatus beneath the desk.

"This way!" Portbane shouted, above the sizzle of the B-blasts. "Come on, Tate!"

Various beams were turned in his direction. Half the chamber burst apart and thundered down, disintegrating into rubble and flaming debris. He and Tate scrambled for one of the emergency exits. Behind them, the others hurried, firing savagely.

Horstokowski found the exit and slid past the jammed lock. He fired as the two figures raced up the passage ahead of him. One of them stumbled, but the other grabbed at him and they hobbled off together. Daniels was a better shot. As Tate and Portbane emerged on the surface, one of Daniels' blasts undercut the taller of the two.

Portbane continued running a little way, and then silently pitched face-forward against the side of a plastic house, a gloomy square of opaque blackness against the night sky.

“Where’d they go?” Silberman demanded hoarsely, as he appeared at the mouth of the passage. His right arm had been torn away by Lanoir’s blast. The stump was seared hard.

“I got one of them.” Daniels and O’Keefe approached the inert figure warily. “It’s Portbane. That leaves Tate. We got three of the four. Not bad, on such short notice.”

“Tate’s damn smart,” Silberman panted. “I think he suspected.”

He scanned the darkness around them. Soldiers, returning from the gas attack, came hurrying up. Searchlights rumbled toward the scene of the shooting. Off in the distance, sirens wailed.

“Which way did he go?” Daniels asked.

“Over toward the bog.”

O’Keefe moved cautiously along the narrow street. The others came slowly behind.

“You were the first to realize,” Horstokowski said to Silberman. “For a while, I believed the test. Then I realized we were being tricked — the four of them were plotting in unison.”

“I didn’t expect four of them,” Silberman admitted. “I knew there was at least one Terran spy among us. But Lanoir…”

“I always knew Lanoir was a Terran agent,” O’Keefe declared flatly. “I wasn’t surprised at the test results. They gave themselves away by faking their findings.”

Silberman waved over a group of soldiers. “Have Tate picked up and brought here. He’s somewhere at the periphery of the camp.”

The soldiers hurried away, dazed and muttering. Alarm bells dinned shrilly on all sides. Figures scampered back and forth. Like a disturbed ant colony, the whole camp was alive with excitement.

“In other words,” Daniels said, “the four of them really saw the same as we. They saw B as the positive sample, but they put down A instead.”

“They knew we’d put down B,” O’Keefe said, “since B was the positive sample taken from the attack site. All they had to do was record the opposite. The results seemed to substantiate Lanoir’s paranoid theory, which was why Portbane set up the test in the first place. It was planned a long time ago — part of their overall job.”

“Lanoir dug up the tapes in the first place!” Daniels exclaimed. “Fisher and he planted them down in the ruins of the ship. Portbane got us to accept his testing device.”

“What were they trying to do?” Silberman asked suddenly. “Why were they trying to convince us we’re paranoids?”

“Isn’t it obvious?” O’Keefe replied. “They wanted us to turn ourselves in. The Terran monkey men naturally are trying to choke off the race that’s going to supplant them. We won’t surrender, of course. The four of them were clever — they almost had me convinced. When the results flashed up five to four, I had a momentary doubt. But then I realized what an intricate strategy they had worked out.”

Horstokowski examined his B-pistol. “I’d like to get hold of Tate and wring the whole story from him, the whole damn account of their planning, so we’d have it in black and white.”

“You’re still not convinced?” Daniels inquired.

“Of course. But I’d like to hear him admit it.”

“I doubt if we’ll see Tate again,” O’Keefe said. “He must have reached the Terran lines by now. He’s probably sitting in a big intersystem military transport, giving his story to gold-braid Terran officials. I’ll bet they’re moving up heavy guns and shock troops while we stand here.”

“We’d better get busy,” Daniels said sharply. “We’ll repair the ship and load it with H-bombs. After we wipe out their bases here, we’ll carry the war to them. A few raids on the Sol System ought to teach them to leave us alone.”

Horstokowski grinned. “It’ll be an uphill fight — we’re alone against a whole galaxy. But I think we’ll take care of them. One of us is worth a million Terran monkey men.”

Tate lay trembling in the dark tangle of weeds. Dripping black stalks of nocturnal vegetables clutched and stirred around him. Poisonous night insects slithered across the surface of the fetid bog.

He was covered with slime. His clothing was torn and ripped. Somewhere along the way, he had lost his B-pistol. His right shoulder ached; he could hardly move his arm. Bones broken, probably. He was too numb and dazed to care. He lay facedown in the sticky muck and closed his eyes.

He didn’t have a chance. Nobody survived in the bogs. He feebly smashed an insect oozing across his neck. It squirmed in his hand and then, reluctantly, died. For a long time, its dead legs kicked.

The probing stalk of a stinging snail began tracing webs across Tate’s inert body. As the sticky pressure of the snail crept heavily onto him, he heard the first faint far-off sounds of the camp going into action. For a time, it meant nothing to him. Then he understood — and shuddered miserably, helplessly.

The first phase of the big offensive against Earth was already moving into high gear.

Upon the Dull Earth

Silvia ran laughing through the night brightness, between the roses and cosmos and Shasta daisies, down the gravel path and beyond the heaps of sweet-tasting grass swept from the lawns. Stars, caught in pools of water, glittered everywhere, as she brushed through them to the slope beyond the brick wall. Cedars supported the sky and ignored the slim shape squeezing past, her brown hair flying, her eyes flashing.

"Wait for me," Rick complained, as he cautiously threaded his way after her, along the half familiar path. Silvia danced on without stopping. "Slow down!" he shouted angrily.

"Can't — we're late." Without warning, Silvia appeared in front of him, blocking the path. "Empty your pockets," she gasped, her gray eyes sparkling. "Throw away all metal. You know they can't stand metal."

Rick searched his pockets. In his overcoat were two dimes and a fifty-cent piece. "Do these count?"

"Yes!" Silvia snatched the coins and threw them into the dark heaps of calla lilies. The bits of metal hissed into the moist depths and were gone. "Anything else?" She caught hold of his arm anxiously. "They're already on their way. Anything else, Rick?"

"Just my watch." Rick pulled his wrist away as Silvia's wild fingers snatched for the watch. "*That's* not going in the bushes."

"Then lay it on the sundial — or the wall. Or in a hollow tree." Silvia raced off again. Her excited, rapturous voice danced back to him. "Throw away your cigarette case. And your keys, your belt buckle — everything metal. You know how they hate metal. Hurry, we're late!"

Rick followed sullenly after her. "All right, *witch."*

Silvia snapped at him furiously from the darkness. “Don’t *say* that! It isn’t true. You’ve been listening to my sisters and my mother and —”

Her words were drowned out by the sound. Distant flapping, a long way off, like vast leaves rustling in a winter storm. The night sky was alive with the frantic poundings; they were coming very quickly this time. They were too greedy, too desperately eager to wait. Flickers of fear touched the man and he ran to catch up with Silvia.

Silvia was a tiny column of green skirt and blouse in the center of the thrashing mass. She was pushing them away with one arm and trying to manage the faucet with the other. The churning activity of wings and bodies twisted her like a reed. For a time she was lost from sight.

“Rick!” she called faintly. “Come here and help!” She pushed them away and struggled up. “They’re suffocating me!”

Rick fought his way through the wall of flashing white to the edge of the trough. They were drinking greedily at the blood that spilled from the wooden faucet. He pulled Silvia close against him; she was terrified and trembling. He held her tight until some of the violence and fury around them had died down.

“They’re hungry,” Silvia gasped feebly.

“You’re a little cretin for coming ahead. They can sear you to ash!”

“I know. They can do anything.” She shuddered, excited and frightened. “Look at them,” she whispered, her voice husky with awe. “Look at the size of them — their wing-spread. And they’re *white,* Rick. Spotless — perfect. There’s nothing in our world as spotless as that. Great and clean and wonderful.”

“They certainly wanted the lamb’s blood.”

Silvia's soft hair blew against his face as the wings fluttered on all sides. They were leaving now, roaring up into the sky. Not up, really — away. Back to their own world whence they had scented the blood. But it was not only the blood — they had come because of Silvia. *She* had attracted them.

The girl's gray eyes were wide. She reached up towards the rising white creatures. One of them swooped close. Grass and flowers sizzled as blinding white flames roared in a brief fountain. Rick scrambled away. The flaming figure hovered momentarily over Silvia and then there was a hollow *pop*. The last of the white-winged giants was gone. The air, the ground, gradually cooled into darkness and silence.

"I'm sorry," Silvia whispered.

"Don't do it again," Rick managed. He was numb with shock. "It isn't safe."

"Sometimes I forget. I'm sorry, Rick. I didn't mean to draw them so close." She tried to smile. "I haven't been that careless in months. Not since that other time, when I first brought you out here." The avid, wild look slid across her face. "Did you *see him?* Power and flames! And he didn't even touch us. He just — looked at us. That was all. And everything's burned up, all around."

Rick grabbed hold of her. "Listen," he grated. "You mustn't call them again. It's wrong. This isn't their world."

"It's not wrong — it's beautiful."

"It's not safe!" His fingers dug into her flesh until she gasped. "Stop tempting them down here!"

Silvia laughed hysterically. She pulled away from him, out into the blasted circle that the horde of angels had seared behind them as they rose

into the sky. “I can’t *help* it,” she cried. “I belong with them. They’re my family, my people. Generations of them, back into the past.”

“What do you mean?”

“They’re my ancestors. And some day I’ll join them.”

“You are a little witch!” Rick shouted furiously.

“No,” Silvia answered. “Not a witch, Rick. Don’t you see? I’m a saint.”

The kitchen was warm and bright. Silvia plugged in the Silex and got a big red can of coffee down from the cupboards over the sink. “You mustn’t listen to them,” she said, as she set out plates and cups and got cream from the refrigerator. “You know they don’t understand. Look at them in there.”

Silvia’s mother and her sisters, Betty Lou and Jean, stood huddled together in the living room, fearful and alert, watching the young couple in the kitchen. Walter Everett was standing by the fireplace, his face blank, remote.

“Listen to *me,*” Rick said. “You have this power to attract them. You mean you’re not — isn’t Walter your real father?”

“Oh, yes — of course he is. I’m completely human. Don’t I look human?”

“But you’re the only one who has the power.”

“I’m not physically different,” Silvia said thoughtfully. “I have the ability to see, that’s all. Others have had it before me — saints, martyrs. When I was a child, my mother read to me about St. Bernadette. Remember where her cave was? Near a hospital. They were hovering there and she saw one of them.”

“But the blood! It’s grotesque. There never was anything like that.”

“Oh, yes. The blood draws them, lamb’s blood especially. They hover over battlefields. Valkyries — carrying off the dead to Valhalla. That’s why saints and martyrs cut and mutilate themselves. You know where I got the idea?”

Silvia fastened a little apron around her waist and filled the Silex with coffee. “When I was nine years old, I read of it in Homer, in the Odyssey. Ulysses dug a trench in the ground and filled it with blood to attract the spirits. The shades from the netherworld.”

“That’s right,” Rick admitted reluctantly. “I remember.”

“The ghosts of people who died. They had lived once. Everybody lives here, then dies and goes there.” Her face glowed. “We’re all going to have wings! We’re all going to fly. We’ll all be filled with fire and power. We won’t be worms any more.”

“Worms! That’s what you always call me.”

“Of course you’re a worm. We’re all worms — grubby worms creeping over the crust of the Earth, through dust and dirt.”

“Why should blood bring them?”

“Because it’s life and they’re attracted by life. Blood is *uisge beatha* -- the water of life.”

“Blood means death! A trough of spilled blood…”

“It’s *not* death. When you see a caterpillar crawl into its cocoon, do you think it’s dying?”

Walter Everett was standing in the doorway. He stood listening to his daughter, his face dark. “One day,” he said hoarsely, “they’re going to grab her and carry her off. She wants to go with them. She’s waiting for that day.”

“You see?” Silvia said to Rick. “He doesn’t understand either.” She shut off the Silex and poured coffee. “Coffee for you?” she asked her father.

“No,” Everett said.

“Silvia,” Rick said, as if speaking to a child, “if you went away with them, you know you couldn’t come back to us.”

“We all have to cross sooner or later. It’s all part of our life.”

“But you’re only nineteen,” Rick pleaded. “You’re young and healthy and beautiful. And our marriage — what about our marriage?” He half rose from the table. “Silvia, you’ve got to stop this!”

“I *can’t* stop it. I was seven when I saw them first.” Silvia stood by the sink, gripping the Silex, a faraway look in her eyes. “Remember, Daddy? We were living back in Chicago. It was winter. I fell, walking home from school.” She held up a slim arm. “See the scar? I fell and cut myself on the gravel and slush. I came home crying — it was sleeting and the wind was howling around me. My arm was bleeding and my mitten was soaked with blood. And then I looked up and saw them.”

There was silence.

“They want you,” Everett said wretchedly. “They’re flies — bluebottles, hovering around, waiting for you. Calling you to come along with them.”

“Why not?” Silvia’s gray eyes were shining and her cheeks radiated joy and anticipation. “You’ve seen them, Daddy. You know what it means. Transfiguration — from clay into gods!”

Rick left the kitchen. In the living-room, the two sisters stood together, curious and uneasy. Mrs. Everett stood by herself, her face granite-hard, eyes bleak behind her steel-rimmed glasses. She turned away as Rick passed them.

“What happened out there?” Betty Lou asked him in a taut whisper. She was fifteen, skinny and plain, hollow cheeked, with mousy, sand-colored hair. “Silvia never lets us come out with her.”

“Nothing happened,” Rick answered.

Anger stirred the girl’s barren face. “That’s not true. You were both out in the garden, in the dark, and —”

“Don’t talk to him!” her mother snapped. She yanked the two girls away and shot Rick a glare of hatred and misery. Then she turned quickly from him.

Rick opened the door to the basement and switched on the light. He descended slowly into the cold, damp room of concrete and dirt, with its unwinking yellow light hanging from the dust-covered wires overhead.

In one corner loomed the big floor furnace with its mammoth hot air pipes. Beside it stood the water heater and discarded bundles, boxes of books, newspapers and old furniture, thick with dust, encrusted with strings of spider webs.

At the far end were the washing machine and spin dryer. And Silvia’s pump and refrigeration system.

From the work bench Rick selected a hammer and two heavy pipe wrenches. He was moving towards the elaborate tanks and pipes when Silvia appeared abruptly at the top of the stairs, her coffee cup in one hand.

She hurried quickly down to him. “What are you doing down here?” she asked, studying him intently. “Why that hammer and those two wrenches?”

Rick dropped the tools back onto the bench. “I thought maybe this could be solved on the spot.”

Silvia moved between him and the tanks. “I thought you understood. They’ve always been a part of my life. When I brought you with me the first time, you seemed to see what —”

“I don’t want to lose you,” Rick said harshly, “to anybody or anything — in this world or any other. *I’m not going to give you up.”*

“It’s not giving me up!” Her eyes narrowed. “You came down here to destroy and break everything. The moment I’m not looking you’ll smash all this, won’t you?”

“That’s right.”

Fear replaced anger on the girl’s face. “Do you want me to be chained here? I have to go on — I’m through with this part of the journey. I’ve stayed here long enough.”

“Can’t you wait?” Rick demanded furiously. He couldn’t keep the ragged edge of despair out of his voice. “Doesn’t it come soon enough anyhow?”

Silvia shrugged and turned away, her arms folded, her red lips tight together. “You want to be a worm always. A fuzzy, little creeping caterpillar.”

“I want *you*.”

“You can’t *have* me!” She whirled angrily. “I don’t have any time to waste with this.”

“You have higher things in mind,” Rick said savagely.

“Of course.” She softened a little. “I’m sorry, Rick. Remember Icarus? You want to fly, too. I know it.”

“In my time.”

“Why not now? Why wait? You’re afraid.” She slid lithely away from him, cunning twisting her red lips. “Rick, I want to show you something. Promise me first — you won’t tell anybody.”

“What is it?”

“Promise?” She put her hand to his mouth. “I have to be careful. It cost a lot of money. Nobody knows about it. It’s what they do in China — everything goes towards it.”

“I’m curious,” Rick said. Uneasiness flicked at him. “Show it to me.”

Trembling with excitement, Silvia disappeared behind the huge lumbering refrigerator, back into the darkness behind the web of frost-hard freezing coils. He could hear her tugging and pulling at something. Scraping sounds, sounds of something large being dragged out.

“See?” Silvia gasped. “Give me a hand, Rick. It’s heavy. Hardwood and brass — and metal lined. It’s hand-stained and polished. And the carving — see the carving! Isn’t it beautiful?”

“What is it?” Rick demanded huskily.

“It’s my cocoon,” Silvia said simply. She settled down in a contented heap on the floor, and rested her head happily against the polished oak coffin.

Rick grabbed her by the arm and dragged her to her feet. “You can’t sit with that coffin, down here in the basement with —” He broke off. “What’s the matter?”

Silvia’s face was twisting with pain. She backed away from him and put her finger quickly to her mouth. “I cut myself — when you pulled me up — on a nail or something.” A thin trickle of blood oozed down her fingers. She groped in her pocket for a handkerchief.

“Let me see it.” He moved towards her, but she avoided him. “Is it bad?” he demanded.

“Stay away from me,” Silvia whispered.

“What’s wrong? Let me see it!”

“Rick,” Silvia said in a low intense voice, “get some water and adhesive tape. As quickly as possible!” She was trying to keep down her rising terror. “I have to stop the bleeding.”

“Upstairs?” He moved awkwardly away. “It doesn’t look too bad. Why don’t you…”

“Hurry.” The girl’s voice was suddenly bleak with fear. “Rick, *hurry!”*

Confused, he ran a few steps.

Silvia’s terror poured after him. “No, it’s too late,” she called thinly. “Don’t come back — keep away from me. It’s my own fault. I trained them to come. *Keep away!* I’m sorry, Rick. *Oh* —” Her voice was lost to him, as the wall of the basement burst and shattered. A cloud of luminous white forced its way through and blazed out into the basement.

It was Silvia they were after. She ran a few hesitant steps towards Rick, halted uncertainly, then the white mass of bodies and wings settled around

her. She shrieked once. Then a violent explosion blasted the basement into a shimmering dance of furnace heat.

He was thrown to the floor. The cement was hot and dry — the whole basement crackled with heat. Windows shattered as pulsing white shapes pushed out again. Smoke and flames licked up the walls. The ceiling sagged and rained plaster down.

Rick struggled to his feet. The furious activity was dying away. The basement was a littered chaos. All surfaces were scorched black, seared and crusted with smoking ash. Splintered wood, torn cloth and broken concrete were strewn everywhere. The furnace and washing machine were in ruins. The elaborate pumping and refrigeration system — now were a glittering mass of slag. One whole wall had been twisted aside. Plaster was rubbled over everything.

Silvia was a twisted heap, arms and legs doubled grotesquely. Shriveled, carbonized remains of fire-scorched ash, settling in a vague mound. What had been left were charred fragments, a brittle burned-out husk.

It was a dark night, cold and intense. A few stars glittered like ice from above his head. A faint, dank wind stirred through the dripping calla lilies and whipped gravel up in a frigid mist along the path between the black roses.

He crouched for a long time, listening and watching. Behind the cedars, the big house loomed against the sky. At the bottom of the slope a few cars slithered along the highway. Otherwise, there was no sound. Ahead of him jutted the squat outline of the porcelain trough and the pipe that had carried blood from the refrigerator in the basement. The trough was empty and dry, except for a few leaves that had fallen in it.

Rick took a deep breath of thin night air and held it. Then he got stiffly to his feet. He scanned the sky, but saw no movement. They were there, though, watching and waiting — dim shadows, echoing into the legendary past, a line of god-figures.

He picked up the heavy gallon drums, dragged them to the trough and poured blood from a New Jersey abattoir, cheap-grade steer refuse, thick and clotted. It splashed against his clothes and he backed away nervously. But nothing stirred in the air above. The garden was silent, drenched with night fog and darkness.

He stood beside the trough, waiting and wondering if they were coming. They had come for Silvia, not merely for the blood. Without her there was no attraction but the raw food. He carried the empty metal cans over to the bushes and kicked them down the slope. He searched his pockets carefully, to make sure there was no metal in them.

Over the years, Silvia had nourished their habit of coming. Now she was on the other side. Did that mean they wouldn't come? Somewhere in the damp bushes something rustled. An animal or a bird?

In the trough the blood glistened, heavy and dull, like old lead. It was their time to come, but nothing stirred the great trees above. He picked out the rows of nodding black roses, the gravel path down which he and Silvia had run — violently he shut out the recent memory of her flashing eyes and deep red lips. The highway beyond the slope — the empty, deserted garden — the silent house in which her family huddled and waited. After a time, there was a dull, swishing sound. He tensed, but it was only a diesel truck lumbering along the highway, headlights blazing.

He stood grimly, his feet apart, his heels dug into the soft black ground. He wasn't leaving. He was staying there until they came. He wanted her back — at any cost.

Overhead, foggy webs of moisture drifted across the moon. The sky was a vast barren plain, without life or warmth. The deathly cold of deep space, away from suns and living things. He gazed up until his neck ached. Cold stars, sliding in and out of the matted layer of fog. Was there anything else? Didn't they want to come, or weren't they interested in him? It had been Silvia who had interested them — now they had her.

Behind him there was a movement without sound. He sensed it and started to turn, but suddenly, on all sides, the trees and undergrowth shifted. Like cardboard props they wavered and ran together, blending dully in the night shadows. Something moved through them, rapidly, silently, then was gone.

They had come. He could feel them. They had shut off their power and flame. Cold, indifferent statues, rising among the trees, dwarfing the cedars — remote from him and his world, attracted by curiosity and mild habit.

"Silvia," he said clearly. "Which are you?"

There was no response. Perhaps she wasn't among them. He felt foolish. A vague flicker of white drifted past the trough, hovered momentarily and then went on without stopping. The air above the trough vibrated, then died into immobility, as another giant inspected briefly and withdrew.

Panic breathed through him. They were leaving again, receding back into their own world. The trough had been rejected; they weren't interested.

"Wait," he muttered thickly.

Some of the white shadows lingered. He approached them slowly, wary of their flickering immensity. If one of them touched him, he would sizzle briefly and puff into a dark heap of ash. A few feet away he halted.

"You know what I want," he said. "I want her back. She shouldn't have been taken yet."

Silence.

"You were too greedy," he said. "You did the wrong thing. She was going to come over to you, eventually. She had it all worked out."

The dark fog rustled. Among the trees the flickering shapes stirred and pulsed, responsive to his voice. *"True,"* came a detached impersonal sound. The sound drifted around him, from tree to tree, without location or direction. It was swept off by the night wind to die into dim echoes.

Relief settled over him. They had paused — they were aware of him — listening to what he had to say.

"You think it's right?" he demanded. "She had a long life here. We were to marry, have children."

There was no answer, but he was conscious of a growing tension. He listened intently, but he couldn't make out anything. Presently he realized a struggle was taking place, a conflict among them. The tension grew — more shapes flickered — the clouds, the icy stars, were obscured by the vast presence swelling around him.

"Rick!" A voice spoke close by. Wavering, drifting back into the dim regions of the trees and dripping plants. He could hardly hear it — the words were gone as soon as they were spoken. "Rick — help me get back."

"Where are you?" He couldn't locate her. "What can I do?"

"I don't know." Her voice was wild with bewilderment and pain. "I don't understand. Something went wrong. They must have thought I-wanted to come right away. I *didn't!"*

"I know," Rick said. "It was an accident."

"They were waiting. The cocoon, the trough — but it was too soon." Her terror came across to him, from the vague distances of another universe. "Rick, I've changed my mind. I want to come back."

"It's not as simple as that."

“I know. Rick, time is different on this side. I’ve been gone so long — your world seems to creep along. It’s been years, hasn’t it?”

“One week,” Rick said.

“It was their fault. You don’t blame me, do you? They know they did the wrong thing. Those who did it have been punished, but that doesn’t help me.” Misery and panic distorted her voice so he could hardly understand her. “How can I come back?”

“Don’t they know?”

“They say it can’t be done.” Her voice trembled. “They say they destroyed the clay part — it was incinerated. There’s nothing for me to go back to.”

Rick took a deep breath. “Make them find some other way. It’s up to them. Don’t they have the power? They took you over too soon — they must send you back. It’s *their* responsibility.”

The white shapes shifted uneasily. The conflict rose sharply; they couldn’t agree. Rick warily moved back a few paces.

“They say it’s dangerous,” Silvia’s voice came from no particular spot. “They say it was attempted once.” She tried to control her voice. “The nexus between this world and yours is unstable. There are vast amounts of free-floating energy. The power we — on this side — have isn’t really our own. It’s a universal energy, tapped and controlled.”

“Why can’t they…”

“This is a higher continuum. There’s a natural process of energy from lower to higher regions. But the reverse process is risky. The blood — it’s a sort of guide to follow — a bright marker.”

“Like moths around a light bulb,” Rick said bitterly.

“If they send me back and something goes wrong —” She broke off and then continued, “If they make a mistake, I might be lost between the two regions. I might be absorbed by the free energy. It seems to be partly alive. It’s not understood. Remember Prometheus and the fire…”

“I see,” Rick said, as calmly as he could.

“Darling, if they try to send me back, I’ll have to find some shape to enter. You see, I don’t exactly have a shape any more. There’s no real material form on this side. What you see, the wings and the whiteness, are not really there. If I succeeded in making the trip back to your side…”

“You’d have to mold something,” Rick said.

“I’d have to take something there — something of clay. I’d have to enter it and reshape it. As He did a long time ago, when the original form was put on your world.”

“If they did it once, they can do it again.”

“The One who did that is gone. He passed on upward.” There was unhappy irony in her voice. “There are regions beyond this. The ladder doesn’t stop here. Nobody knows where it ends, it just seems to keep on going up and up. World after world.”

“Who decides about you?” Rick demanded.

“It’s up to me,” Silvia said faintly. “They say, if I want to take the chance, they’ll try it.”

“What do you think you’ll do?” he asked.

“I’m afraid. What if something goes wrong? You haven’t seen it, the region between. The possibilities there are incredible — they terrify me. He was the only one with enough courage. Everyone else has been afraid.”

“It was their fault. They have to take responsibility.”

“They know that.” Silvia hesitated miserably. “Rick, darling, please tell me what to do.”

“Come back!”

Silence. Then her voice, thin and pathetic. “All right, Rick. If you think that’s the right thing.”

“It is,” he said firmly. He forced his mind not to think, not to picture or imagine anything. *He had to have her back.* “Tell them to get started now. Tell them —”

A deafening crack of heat burst in front of him. He was lifted up and tossed into a flaming sea of pure energy. They were leaving and the scalding lake of sheer power bellowed and thundered around him. For a split second he thought he glimpsed Silvia, her hands reaching imploringly towards him.

Then the fire cooled and he lay blinded in dripping, night-moistened darkness. Alone in the silence.

Walter Everett was helping him up. “You damn fool!” he was saying, again and again. “You shouldn’t have brought them back. They’ve got enough from us.”

Then he was in the big, warm living room. Mrs. Everett stood silently in front of him, her face hard and expressionless. The two daughters hovered

anxiously around him, fluttering and curious, eyes wide with morbid fascination.

“I’ll be all right,” Rick muttered. His clothing was charred and blacked. He rubbed black ash from his face. Bits of dried grass stuck to his hair — they had seared a circle around him as they’d ascended. He lay back against the couch and closed his eyes. When he opened them, Betty Lou Everett was forcing a glass of water into his hands.

“Thanks,” he muttered.

“You should never have gone out there,” Walter Everett repeated. “Why? Why’d you do it? You know what happened to her. You want the same thing to happen to you?”

“I want her back,” Rick said quietly.

“Are you mad? You can’t get her back. She’s gone.” His lips twitched convulsively. “You saw her.”

Betty Lou was gazing at Rick intently. “What happened out there?” she demanded. “You saw her.”

Rick got heavily to his feet and left the living room. In the kitchen he emptied the water in the sink and poured himself a drink. While he was leaning wearily against the sink, Betty Lou appeared in the doorway.

“What do you want?” Rick demanded.

The girl’s face was flushed an unhealthy red. “I know something happened out there. You were feeding them, weren’t you?” She advanced towards him. “You’re trying to get her back?”

“That’s right,” Rick said.

Betty Lou giggled nervously. “But you can’t. She’s dead — her body’s been cremated — I saw it.” Her face worked excitedly. “Daddy always said that something bad would happen to her, and it did.” She leaned close to Rick. “She was a witch! She got what she deserved!”

“She’s coming back,” Rick said.

“*No!”* Panic stirred the girl’s drab features. “She *can’t* come back. She’s dead — like she always said — worm into butterfly — she’s a butterfly!”

“Go inside,” Rick said.

“You can’t order me around,” Betty Lou answered. Her voice rose hysterically. “This is *my* house. We don’t want you around here any more. Daddy’s going to tell you. He doesn’t want you and I don’t want you and my mother and sister…”

The change came without warning. Like a film gone dead, Betty Lou froze, her mouth half open, one arm raised, her words dead on her tongue. She was suspended, an instantly lifeless thing raised off the floor, as if caught between two slides of glass. A vacant insect, without speech or sound, inert and hollow. Not dead, but abruptly thinned back to primordial inanimacy.

Into the captured shell filtered new potency and being. It settled over her, a rainbow of life that poured into place eagerly — like hot fluid — into every part of her. The girl stumbled and moaned; her body jerked violently and pitched against the wall. A china teacup tumbled from an overhead shelf and smashed on the floor. The girl retreated numbly, one hand to her mouth, her eyes wide with pain and shock.

“Oh!” she gasped. “I cut myself.” She shook her head and gazed up mutely at him, appealing to him. “On a nail or something.”

“Silvia!” He caught hold of her and dragged her to her feet, away from the wall. It was *her* arm he gripped, warm and full and mature. Stunned gray eyes, brown hair, quivering breasts — she was now as she had been those last moments in the basement.

“Let’s see it,” he said. He tore her hand from her mouth and shakily examined her finger. There was no cut, only a thin white line rapidly dimming. “It’s all right, honey. You’re all right. There’s nothing wrong with you!”

“Rick, I was over *there.”* Her voice was husky and faint. “They came and dragged me across with them.” She shuddered violently. “Rick, am I actually *back?”*

He crushed her tight. “Completely back.”

“It was so long. I was over there a century. Endless ages. I thought —” Suddenly she pulled away. “Rick…”

“What is it?”

Silvia’s face was wild with fear. “There’s something wrong.”

“There’s nothing wrong. You’ve come back home and that’s all that matters.”

Silvia retreated from him. “But they took a living form, didn’t they? Not discarded clay. They don’t have the power, Rick. They altered His work instead.” Her voice rose in panic. “A mistake — they should have known better than to alter the balance. It’s unstable and none of them can control the…”

Rick blocked the doorway. “Stop talking like that!” he said fiercely. “It’s worth it — *anything’s* worth it. If they set things out of balance, it’s their

own fault."

"We can't turn it back!" Her voice rose shrilly, thin and hard, like drawn wire. "We've set it in motion, started the waves lapping out. The balance He set up is *altered."*

"Come on, darling," Rick said. "Let's go and sit in the living room with your family. You'll feel better. You'll have to try to recover from this."

They approached the three seated figures, two on the couch, one in the traight chair by the fireplace. The figures sat motionless, their faces blank, their bodies limp and waxen, dulled forms that did not respond as the couple entered the room.

Rick halted, uncomprehending. Walter Everett was slumped forward, newspaper in one hand, slippers on his feet; his pipe was still smoking in the deep ashtray on the arm of his chair. Mrs. Everett sat with a lapful of sewing, her face grim and stern, but strangely vague. An unformed face, as if the material were melting and running together. Jean sat huddled in a shapeless heap, a ball of clay wadded up, more formless each moment.

Abruptly Jean collapsed. Her arms fell loose beside her. Her head sagged. Her body, her arms and legs filled out. Her features altered rapidly. Her clothing changed. Colors flowed in her hair, her eyes, her skin. The waxen pallor was gone.

Pressing her fingers to her lips she gazed up at Rick mutely. She blinked and her eyes focused. "Oh," she gasped. Her lips moved awkwardly; the voice was faint and uneven, like a poor soundtrack. She struggled up jerkily, with uncoordinated movements that propelled her stiffly to her feet and towards him — one awkward step at a time — like a wire dummy.

"Rick, I cut myself," she said. "On a nail or something."

What had been Mrs. Everett stirred. Shapeless and vague, it made dull sounds and flopped grotesquely. Gradually it hardened and shaped itself. “My finger,” its voice gasped feebly. Like mirror echoes dimming off into darkness, the third figure in the easy chair took up the words. Soon, they were all of them repeating the phrase, four fingers, their lips moving in unison.

“My finger. I cut myself, Rick.”

Parrot reflections, receding mimicries of words and movement. And the settling shapes were familiar in every detail. Again and again, repeated around him, twice on the couch, in the easy chair, close beside him — so close he could hear her breath and see her trembling lips.

“What is it?” the Silvia beside him asked.

On the couch one Silvia resumed its sewing — she was sewing methodically, absorbed in her work. In the deep chair another took up its newspapers, its pipe and continued reading. One huddled, nervous and afraid. The one beside him followed as he retreated to the door. She was panting with uncertainty, her gray eyes wide, her nostrils flaring.

“Rick…”

He pulled the door open and made his way out onto the dark porch. Machine-like, he felt his way down the steps, through the pools of night collected everywhere, toward the driveway. In the yellow square of light behind him, Silvia was outlined, peering unhappily after him. And behind her, the other figures, identical, pure repetitions, nodding over their tasks.

He found his coupe and pulled out onto the road.

Gloomy trees and houses flashed past. He wondered how far it would go. Lapping waves spreading out — a widening circle as the imbalance spread.

He turned onto the main highway; there were soon more cars around him. He tried to see into them, but they moved too swiftly. The car ahead was a red Plymouth. A heavyset man in a blue business suit was driving, laughing merrily with the woman beside him. He pulled his own coupe up close behind the Plymouth and followed it. The man flashed gold teeth, grinned, waved his plump hands. The girl was dark-haired, pretty. She smiled at the man, adjusted her white gloves, smoothed down her hair, then rolled up the window on her side.

He lost the Plymouth. A heavy diesel truck cut in between them. Desperately he swerved around the truck and nosed in beyond the swift-moving red sedan. Presently it passed him and, for a moment, the two occupants were clearly framed. The girl resembled Silvia. The same delicate line of her small chin — the same deep lips, parting slightly when she smiled — the same slender arms and hands. It was Silvia. The Plymouth turned off and there was no other car ahead of him.

He drove for hours through the heavy night darkness. The gas gauge dropped lower and lower. Ahead of him dismal rolling countryside spread out, blank fields between towns and unwinking stars suspended in the bleak sky. Once, a cluster of red and yellow lights gleamed. An intersection — filling stations and a big neon sign. He drove on past it.

At a single-pump stand, he pulled the car off the highway, onto the oil-soaked gravel. He climbed out, his shoes crunching the stone underfoot, as he grabbed the gas hose and unscrewed the cap of his car’s tank. He had the tank almost full when the door of the drab station building opened and a slim woman in white overalls and navy shirt, with a little cap lost in her brown curls, stepped out.

“Good evening, Rick,” she said quietly.

He put back the gas hose. Then he was driving out onto the highway. Had he screwed the cap back on again? He didn’t remember. He gained speed. He had gone over a hundred miles. He was nearing the state line.

At a little roadside cafe, warm, yellow light glowed in the chill gloom of early morning. He slowed the car down and parked at the edge of the highway in the deserted parking lot. Bleary-eyed he pushed the door open and entered.

Hot, thick smells of cooking ham and black coffee surrounded him, the comfortable sight of people eating. A jukebox blared in the corner. He threw himself onto a stool and hunched over, his head in his hands. A thin farmer next to him glanced at him curiously and then returned to his newspaper. Two hard-faced women across from him gazed at him momentarily. A handsome youth in denim jacket and jeans was eating red beans and rice, washing it down with steaming coffee from a heavy mug.

“What’ll it be?” the pert blonde waitress asked, a pencil behind her ear, her hair tied back in a tight bun. “Looks like you’ve got some hangover, mister.”

He ordered coffee and vegetable soup. Soon he was eating, his hands working automatically. He found himself devouring a ham and cheese sandwich; had he ordered it? The jukebox blared and people came and went. There was a little town sprawled beside the road, set back in some gradual hills. Gray sunlight, cold and sterile, filtered down as morning came. He ate hot apple pie and sat wiping dully at his mouth with a napkin.

The cafe was silent. Outside nothing stirred. An uneasy calm hung over everything. The jukebox had ceased. None of the people at the counter stirred or spoke. An occasional truck roared past, damp and lumbering, windows rolled up tight.

When he looked up, Silvia was standing in front of him. Her arms were folded and she gazed vacantly past him. A bright yellow pencil was behind her ear. Her brown hair was tied back in a hard bun. At the corner others were sitting, other Silvias, dishes in front of them, half dozing or eating, some of them reading. Each the same as the next, except for their clothing.

He made his way back to his parked car. In half an hour he had crossed the state line. Cold, bright sunlight sparkled off dew-moist roofs and pavements as he sped through tiny unfamiliar towns.

Along the shiny morning streets he saw them moving — early risers, on their way to work. In twos and threes they walked, their heels echoing in sharp silence. At bus stops he saw groups of them collected together. In the houses, rising from their beds, eating breakfast, bathing, dressing, were more of them — hundreds of them, legions without number. A town of them preparing for the day, resuming their regular tasks, as the circle widened and spread.

He left the town behind. The car slowed under him as his foot slid heavily from the gas pedal. Two of them walked across a level field together. They carried books — children on their way to school. Repetition, unvarying and identical. A dog circled excitedly after them, unconcerned, his joy untainted.

He drove on. Ahead a city loomed, its stern columns of office buildings sharply outlined against the sky. The streets swarmed with noise and activity as he passed through the main business section. Somewhere, near the center of the city, he overtook the expanding periphery of the circle and emerged beyond. Diversity took the place of the endless figures of Silvia. Gray eyes and , brown hair gave way to countless varieties of men and women, children and adults, of all ages and appearances. He increased his speed and raced out on the far side, onto the wide four-lane highway.

He finally slowed down. He was exhausted. He had driven for hours; his body was shaking with fatigue.

Ahead of him a carrot-haired youth was cheerfully thumbing a ride, a thin bean-pole in brown slacks and light camel’s-hair sweater. Rick pulled to a halt and opened the front door. “Hop in,” he said.

“Thanks, buddy.” The youth hurried to the car and climbed in as Rick gathered speed. He slammed the door and settled gratefully back against the

seat. “It was getting hot, standing there.”

“How far are you going?” Rick demanded.

“All the way to Chicago.” The youth grinned shyly. “Of course, I don’t expect you to drive me that far. Anything at all is appreciated.” He eyed Rick curiously. “Which way you going?”

“Anywhere,” Rick said. “I’ll drive you to Chicago.”

“It’s two hundred miles!”

“Fine,” Rick said. He steered over into the left lane and gained speed. “If you want to go to New York, I’ll drive you there.”

“You feel all right?” The youth moved away uneasily. “I sure appreciate a lift, but…” He hesitated. “I mean, I don’t want to take you out of your way.”

Rick concentrated on the road ahead, his hands gripping hard around the rim of the wheel. “I’m going fast. I’m not slowing down or stopping.”

“You better be careful,” the youth warned, in a troubled voice. “I don’t want to get in an accident.”

“I’ll do the worrying.”

“But it’s dangerous. What if something happens? It’s too risky.”

“You’re wrong,” Rick muttered grimly, eyes on the road. “It’s worth the risk.”

“But if something goes wrong —” The voice broke off uncertainly and then continued, “I might be lost. It would be so easy. It’s all so unstable.”

The voice trembled with worry and fear. “Rick, please…”

Rick whirled. “How do you know my name?”

The youth was crouched in a heap against the door. His face had a soft, molten look, as if it were losing its shape and sliding together in an unformed mass. “I want to come back,” he was saying, from within himself, “but I’m afraid. You haven’t seen it — the region between. It’s nothing but energy, Rick. He tapped it a long time ago, but nobody else knows how.”

The voice lightened, became clear and treble. The hair faded to a rich brown. Gray, frightened eyes flickered up at Rick. Hands frozen, he hunched over the wheel and forced himself not to move. Gradually he decreased speed and brought the car over into the right-hand lane.

“Are we stopping?” the shape beside him asked. It was Silvia’s voice now. Like a new insect, drying in the sun, the shape hardened and locked into firm reality. Silvia struggled up on the seat and peered out. “Where are we? We’re between towns.”

He jammed on the brakes, reached past her and threw open the door. “Get out!”

Silvia gazed at him uncomprehendingly. “What do you mean?” she faltered. “Rick, what is it? What’s wrong?”

“Get out!”

“Rick, I don’t understand.” She slid over a little. Her toes touched the pavement. “Is there something wrong with the car? I thought everything was all right.”

He gently shoved her out and slammed the door. The car leaped ahead, out into the stream of mid-morning traffic. Behind him the small, dazed

figure was pulling itself up, bewildered and injured. He forced his eyes from the rearview mirror and crushed down the gas pedal with all his weight.

The radio buzzed and clicked in vague static when he snapped it briefly on. He turned the dial and, after a time, a big network station came in. A faint, puzzled voice, a woman's voice. For a time he couldn't make out the words. Then he recognized it and, with a pang of panic, switched the thing off.

Her voice. Murmuring plaintively. Where was the station? Chicago. The circle had already spread that far.

He slowed down. There was no point hurrying. It had already passed him by and gone on. Kansas farms — sagging stores in little old Mississippi towns — along the bleak streets of New England manufacturing cities swarms of brown-haired gray-eyed women would be hurrying.

It would cross the ocean. Soon it would take in the whole world. Africa would be strange — kraals of white-skinned young women, all exactly alike, going about the primitive chores of hunting and fruit-gathering, mashing grain, skinning animals. Building fires and weaving cloth and carefully shaping razor-sharp knives.

In China… he grinned inanely. She'd look strange there, too. In the austere high-collar suit, the almost monastic robe of the young communist cadres. Parade marching up the main streets of Peiping. Row after row of slim-legged full-breasted girls, with heavy Russian-made rifles. Carrying spades, picks, shovels. Columns of cloth-booted soldiers. Fast-moving workers with their precious tools. Reviewed by an identical figure on the elaborate stand overlooking the street, one slender arm raised, her gentle, pretty face expressionless and wooden.

He turned off the highway onto a side road. A moment later he was on his way back, driving slowly, listlessly, the way he had come.

At an intersection a traffic cop waded out through traffic to his car. He sat rigid, hands on the wheel, waiting numbly.

“Rick” she whispered pleadingly as she reached the window. “Isn’t everything all right?”

“Sure,” he answered dully.

She reached in through the open window and touched him imploringly on the arm. Familiar fingers, red nails, the hand he knew so well, “I want to be with you so badly. Aren’t we together again? Aren’t I back?”

“Sure.” -

She shook her head miserably. “I don’t understand,” she repeated. “I thought it was all right again.”

Savagely he put the car into motion and hurtled ahead. The intersection was left behind.

It was afternoon. He was exhausted, riddled with fatigue. He guided the car towards his own town automatically. Along the streets she hurried everywhere, on all sides. She was omnipresent. He came to his apartment building and parked.

The janitor greeted him in the empty hall. Rick identified him by the greasy rag clutched in one hand, the big push-broom, the bucket of wood shavings. “Please,” she implored, “tell me what it is, Rick. Please tell me.”

He pushed past her, but she caught at him desperately. “Rick, *I’m back.* Don’t you understand? They took me too soon and then they sent me back again. It was a mistake. I won’t ever call them again — that’s all in the past.” She followed after him, down the hall to the stairs. “I’m never going to call them again.”

He climbed the stairs. Silvia hesitated, then settled down on the bottom step in a wretched, unhappy heap, a tiny figure in thick workman's clothing and huge cleated boots.

He unlocked his apartment door and entered.

The late afternoon sky was a deep blue beyond the windows. The roofs of nearby apartment buildings sparkled white in the sun.

His body ached. He wandered clumsily into the bathroom — it seemed alien and unfamiliar, a difficult place to find. He filled the bowl with hot water, rolled up his sleeves and washed his face and hands in the swirling hot stream. Briefly, he glanced up.

It was a terrified reflection that showed out of the mirror above the bowl, a face, tear-stained and frantic. The face was difficult to catch — it seemed to waver and slide. Gray eyes, bright with terror. Trembling red mouth, pulse-fluttering throat, soft brown hair. The face gazed out pathetically — and then the girl at the bowl bent to dry herself.

She turned and moved wearily out of the bathroom into the living room.

Confused, she hesitated, then threw herself onto a chair and closed her eyes, sick with misery and fatigue.

"Rick," she murmured pleadingly. "Try to help me. I'm back, aren't I?" She shook her head, bewildered. "Please, Rick, I thought everything was all right."

Foster, You’re Dead

School was agony, as always. Only today it was worse. Mike Foster finished weaving his two watertight baskets and sat rigid, while all around him the other children worked. Outside the concrete-and-steel building the late-afternoon sun shone cool. The hills sparkled green and brown in the crisp autumn air. In the overhead sky a few NATS circled lazily above the town.

The vast, ominous shape of Mrs. Cummings, the teacher, silently approached his desk. “Foster, are you finished?”

“Yes, ma’am,” he answered eagerly. He pushed the baskets up. “Can I leave now?”

Mrs. Cummings examined his baskets critically. “What about your trap-making?” she demanded.

He fumbled in his desk and brought out his intricate small-animal trap. “All finished, Mrs. Cummings. And my knife, it’s done, too.” He showed her the razor-edged blade of his knife, glittering metal he had shaped from a discarded gasoline drum. She picked up the knife and ran her expert finger doubtfully along the blade.

“Not strong enough,” she stated. “You’ve oversharpened it. It’ll lose its edge the first time you use it. Go down to the main weapons-lab and examine the knives they’ve got there. Then hone it back some and get a thicker blade.”

“Mrs. Cummings,” Mike Foster pleased, “could I fix it *tomorrow?* Could I leave right now, please?”

Everybody in the classroom was watching with interest. Mike Foster flushed; he hated to be singled out and made conspicuous, but he *had* to get

away. He couldn’t stay in school one minute more.

Inexorable, Mrs. Cummings rumbled, “Tomorrow is digging day. You won’t have time to work on your knife.”

“I will,” he assured her quickly. “After the digging.”

“No, you’re not too good at digging.” The old woman was measuring the boy’s spindly arms and legs. “I think you better get your knife finished today. And spend all day tomorrow down at the field.”

“What’s the use of digging?” Mike Foster demanded, in despair.

“Everybody has to know how to dig,” Mrs. Cummings answered patiently. Children were snickering on all sides; she shushed them with a hostile glare. “You all know the importance of digging. When the war begins the whole surface will be littered with debris and rubble. If we hope to survive we’ll have to dig down, won’t we? Have any of you ever watched a gopher digging around the roots of plants? The gopher knows he’ll find something valuable down there under the surface of the ground. We’re all going to be little brown gophers. We’ll all have to learn to dig down in the rubble and find the good things, because that’s where they’ll be.”

Mike Foster sat miserably plucking his knife, as Mrs. Cummings moved away from his desk and up the aisle. A few children grinned contemptuously at him, but nothing penetrated his haze of wretchedness. Digging wouldn’t do him any good. When the bombs came he’d be killed instantly. All the vaccination shots up and down his arms, on his thighs and buttocks, would be of no use. He had wasted his allowance money: Mike Foster wouldn’t be alive to catch any of the bacterial plagues. Not unless —

He sprang up and followed Mrs. Cummings to her desk. In an agony of desperation he blurted, “Please, I have to leave. I have to do something.”

Mrs. Cumming's tired lips twisted angrily. But the boy's fearful eyes stopped her. "What's wrong?" she demanded. "Don't you feel well?"

The boy stood frozen, unable to answer her. Pleased by the tableau, the class murmured and giggled until Mrs. Cummings rapped angrily on her desk with a writer. "Be quiet," she snapped. Her voice softened a shade. "Michael, if you're not functioning properly, go downstairs to the psyche clinic. There's no point trying to work when your reactions are conflicted. Miss Groves will be glad to optimum you."

"No," Foster said.

"Then what is it?"

The class stirred. Voices answered for Foster; his tongue was stuck with misery and humiliation. "His father's an anti-P," the voices explained. "They don't have a shelter and he isn't registered in Civic Defense. His father hasn't even contributed to the NATS. They haven't done anything."

Mrs. Cummings gazed up in amazement at the mute boy. "You don't have a shelter?"

He shook his head.

A strange feeling filled the woman. "But —" She had started to say, *But you'll die up here.* She changed it to "But where'll you go?"

"Nowhere," the mild voices answered for him. "Everybody else'll be down in their shelters and he'll be up here. He even doesn't have a permit for the school shelter."

Mrs. Cummings was shocked. In her dull, scholastic way she had assumed every child in the school had a permit to the elaborate subsurface chambers under the building. But of course not. Only children whose

parents were part of CD, who contributed to arming the community. And if Foster's father was an anti-P…

"He's afraid to sit here," the voices chimed in calmly. "He's afraid it'll come while he's sitting here, and everybody else will be safe down in the shelter."

He wandered slowly along, hands deep in his pockets, kicking at dark stones on the sidewalk. The sun was setting. Snub-nosed commute rockets were unloading tired people, glad to be home from the factory strip a hundred miles to the west. On the distant hills something flashed: a radar tower revolving silently in the evening gloom. The circling NATS had increased in number. The twilight hours were the most dangerous; visual observers couldn't spot high-speed missiles coming in close to the ground. Assuming the missiles came.

A mechanical news-machine shouted at him excitedly as he passed. War, death, amazing new weapons developed at home and abroad. He hunched his shoulders and continued on, past the little concrete shells that served as houses, each exactly alike, sturdy reinforced pillboxes. Ahead of him bright neon signs glowed in the settling gloom: the business district, alive with traffic and milling people.

Half a block from the bright cluster of neons he halted. To his right was a public shelter, a dark tunnel-like entrance with a mechanical turnstile glowing dully. Fifty cents admission. If he was here, on the street, and he had fifty cents, he'd be all right. He had pushed down into public shelters many times, during the practice raids. But other times, hideous, nightmare times that never left his mind, he hadn't had the fifty cents. He had stood mute and terrified, while people pushed excitedly past him; and the shrill shrieks of the sirens thundered everywhere.

He continued slowly, until he came to the brightest blotch of light, the great, gleaming showrooms of General Electronics, two blocks long, illuminated on all sides, a vast square of pure color and radiation. He halted

and examined for the millionth time the fascinating shapes, the display that always drew him to a hypnotized stop whenever he passed.

In the center of the vast room was a single object. An elaborate pulsing blob of machinery and support struts, beams and walls and sealed locks. All spotlights were turned on it; huge signs announced its hundred and one advantages — as if there could be any doubt.

THE NEW 1972 BOMBPROOF RADIATION-SEALED

SUBSURFACE SHELTER IS HERE! CHECK THESE

STAR-STUDDED FEATURES:

* automatic descent-lift — jam-proof, self-powered, e-z locking

* triple-layer hull guaranteed to withstand 5*g* pressure without buckling

* A-powered heating and refrigeration system — self-servicing air-purification network

* three decontamination stages for food and water

* four hygienic stages for pre-burn exposure

* complete antibiotic processing

* e-z payment plan

He gazed at the shelter a long time. It was mostly a big tank, with a neck at one end that was the descent tube, and an emergency escape-hatch at the other. It was completely self-contained: a miniature world that supplied its own light, heat, air, water, medicines, and almost inexhaustible food. When fully stocked there were visual and audio tapes, entertainment, beds, chairs, vidscreen, everything that made up the above-surface home. It was, actually, a home below the ground. Nothing was missing that might be needed or enjoyed. A family would be safe, even comfortable, during the most severe H-bomb and bacterial-spray attack.

It cost twenty thousand dollars.

While he was gazing silently at the massive display, one of the salesmen stepped out onto the dark sidewalk, on his way to the cafeteria. “Hi, sonny,” he said automatically, as he passed Mike Foster. “Not bad, is it?”

“Can I go inside?” Foster asked quickly. “Can I go down in it?”

The salesman stopped, as he recognized the boy. “You’re that kid,” he said slowly, “that damn kid who’s always pestering us.”

“I’d like to go down in it. Just for a couple minutes. I won’t bust anything — I promise. I won’t even touch anything.”

The salesman was young and blond, a good-looking man in his early twenties. He hesitated, his reactions divided. The kid was a pest. But he had a family, and that meant a reasonable prospect. Business was bad; it was late September and the seasonal slump was still on. There was no profit in telling the boy to go peddle his newstapes; but on the other hand it was bad business encouraging small fry to crawl around the merchandise. They wasted time; they broke things; they pilfered small stuff when nobody was looking.

“No dice,” the salesman said. “Look, send your old man down here. Has he seen what we’ve got?”

“Yes,” Mike Foster said tightly.

“What’s holding him back?” The salesman waved expansively up at the great gleaming display. “We’ll give him a good trade-in on his old one, allowing for depreciation and obsolescence. What model has he got?”

“We don’t have any,” Mike Foster said.

The salesman blinked. “Come again?” ‘

“My father says it’s a waste of money. He says they’re trying to scare people into buying things they don’t need. He says —”

“Your father’s an anti-P?”

“Yes,” Mike Foster answered unhappily.

The salesman let out his breath. “Okay, kid. Sorry we can’t do business. It’s not your fault.” He lingered. “What the hell’s wrong with him? Does he put on the NATS?”

“No.”

The salesman swore under his breath. A coaster, sliding along, safe because the rest of the community was putting up thirty per cent of its income to keep a constant-defense system going. There were always a few of them, in every town. “How’s your mother feel?” the salesman demanded. “She go along with him?”

“She says —” Mike Foster broke off. “Couldn’t I go down in it for a little while? I won’t bust anything. Just *once.”*

“How’d we ever sell it if we let kids run through it? We’re not marking it down as a demonstration model — we’ve got roped into that too often.” The salesman’s curiosity was aroused. “How’s a guy get to be anti-P? He always feel this way, or did he get stung with something?”

“He says they sold people as many cars and washing machines and television sets as they could use. He says NATS and bomb shelters aren’t good for anything, so people never get all they can use. He says factories can keep turning out guns and gas masks forever, and as long as people are afraid they’ll keep paying for them because they think if they don’t they might get killed, and maybe a man gets tired of paying for a new car every year and stops, but he’s never going to stop buying shelters to protect his children.”

“You believe that?” the salesman asked.

“I wish we had that shelter,” Mike Foster answered. “If we had a shelter like that I’d go down and sleep in it every night. It’d be there when we needed it.”

“Maybe there won’t be a war,” the salesman said. He sensed the boy’s misery and fear, and he grinned good-naturedly down at him. “Don’t worry all the time. You probably watch too many vidtapes — get out and play, for a change.”

“Nobody’s safe on the surface,” Mike Foster said. “We have to be down below. And there’s no place I can go.”

“Send your old man around,” the salesman muttered uneasily. “Maybe we can talk him into it. We’ve got a lot of time-payment plans. Tell him to ask for Bill O’Neill. Okay?”

Mike Foster wandered away, down the black evening street. He knew he was supposed to be home, but his feet dragged and his body was heavy and dull. His fatigue made him remember what the athletic coach had said the day before, during exercises. They were practicing breath suspension, holding a lungful of air and running. He hadn’t done well; the others were still redfaced and racing when he halted, expelled his air, and stood gasping frantically for breath.

“Foster,” the coach said angrily, “you’re dead. You know that? If this had been a gas attack —” He shook his head wearily. “Go over there and practice by yourself. You’ve got to do better, if you expect to survive.”

But he didn’t expect to survive.

When he stepped up onto the porch of his home, he found the living room lights already on. He could hear his father’s voice, and more faintly

his mother's from the kitchen. He closed the door after him and began unpeeling his coat.

"Is that you?" his father demanded. Bob Foster sat sprawled out in his chair, his lap full of tapes and report sheets from his retail furniture store. "Where have you been? Dinner's been ready half an hour." He had taken off his coat and rolled up his sleeves. His arms were pale and thin, but muscular. He was tired; his eyes were large and dark, his hair thinning. Restlessly, he moved the tapes around, from one stack to another.

"I'm sorry," Mike Foster said.

His father examined his pocket watch; he was surely the only man who still carried a watch. "Go wash your hands. What have you been doing?" He scrutinized his son. "You look odd. Do you feel all right?"

"I was downtown," Mike Foster said.

"What were you doing?"

"Looking at the shelters."

Wordless, his father grabbed up a handful of reports and stuffed them into a folder. His thin lips set; hard lines wrinkled his forehead. He snorted furiously as tapes spilled everywhere; he bent stiffly to pick them up. Mike Foster made no move to help him. He crossed to the closet and gave his coat to the hanger. When he turned away his mother was directing the table of food into the dining room.

They ate without speaking, intent on their food and not looking at each other. Finally his father said, "What'd you see? Same old dogs, I suppose."

"There's the new '72 models," Mike Foster answered.

“They’re the same as the ‘71 models.” His father threw down his fork savagely; the table caught and absorbed it. “A few new gadgets, some more chrome. That’s all.” Suddenly he was facing his son defiantly. “Right?”

Mike Foster toyed wretchedly with his creamed chicken. “The new ones have a jam-proof descent lift. You can’t get stuck halfway down. All you have to do is get in it, and it does the rest.”

“There’ll be one next year that’ll pick you up and carry you down. This one’ll be obsolete as soon as people buy it. That’s what they want — they want you to keep buying. They keep putting out new ones as fast as they can. This isn’t 1972, it’s still 1971. What’s that thing doing out already? Can’t they wait?”

Mike Foster didn’t answer. He had heard it all before, many times. There was never anything new, only chrome and gadgets; yet the old ones became obsolete, anyhow. His father’s argument was loud, impassioned, almost frenzied, but it made no sense. “Let’s get an old one, then,” he blurted out. “I don’t care, any one’ll do. Even a secondhand one.”

“No, you want the *new* one. Shiny and glittery to impress the neighbors. Lots of dials and knobs and machinery. How much do they want for it?”

“Twenty thousand dollars.”

His father let his breath out. “Just like that.”

“They’ve easy time-payment plans.”

“Sure. You pay for it the rest of your life. Interest, carrying charges, and how long is it guaranteed for?”

“Three months.”

“What happens when it breaks down? It’ll stop purifying and decontaminating. It’ll fall apart as soon as the three months are over.”

Mike Foster shook his head. “No. It’s big and sturdy.”

His father flushed. He was a small man, slender and light, brittle-boned. He thought suddenly of his lifetime of lost battles, struggling up the hard way, carefully collecting and holding on to something, a job, money, his retail store, bookkeeper to manager, finally owner. “They’re scaring us to keep the wheels going,” he yelled desperately at his wife and son. “They don’t want another depression.”

“Bob,” his wife said, slowly and quietly, “you have to stop this. I can’t stand any more.”

Bob Foster blinked. “What’re you talking about?” he muttered. “I’m tired. These goddamn taxes. It isn’t possible for a little store to keep open, not with the big chains. There ought to be a law.” His voice trailed off. “I guess I’m through eating.” He pushed away from the table and got to his feet. “I’m going to lie down on the couch and take a nap.”

His wife’s thin face blazed. “You have to get one! I can’t stand the way they talk about us. All the neighbors and the merchants, everybody who knows. I can’t go anywhere or do anything without hearing about it. Ever since that day they put up the flag. *Anti-P.* The last in the whole town. Those things circling around up there, and everybody paying for them but us.”

“No,” Bob Foster said. “I can’t get one.”

“Why not?”

“Because,” he answered simply, “I can’t afford it.”

There was silence.

“You’ve put everything in that store,” Ruth said finally. “And it’s failing anyhow. You’re just like a pack-rat, hoarding everything down at that ratty little hole-in-the-wall. Nobody wants wood furniture anymore. You’re a relic — a curiosity.” She slammed at the table and it leaped wildly to gather the empty dishes, like a startled animal. It dashed furiously from the room and back into the kitchen, the dishes churning in its washtank as it raced.

Bob Foster sighed wearily. “Let’s not fight. I’ll be in the living room. Let me take a nap for an hour or so. Maybe we can talk about it later.”

“Always later,” Ruth said bitterly.

Her husband disappeared into the living room, a small, hunched-over figure, hair scraggly and gray, shoulder blades like broken wings.

Mike got to his feet. “I’ll go study my homework,” he said. He followed after his father, a strange look on his face.

The living room was quiet; the vidset was off and the lamp was down low. Ruth was in the kitchen setting the controls on the stove for the next month’s meals. Bob Foster lay stretched out on the couch, his shoes off, his head on a pillow. His face was gray with fatigue. Mike hesitated for a moment and then said, “Can I ask you something?”

His father grunted and stirred, opened his eyes. “What?”

Mike sat down facing him. “Tell me again how you gave advice to the President.”

His father pulled himself up. “I didn’t give any advice to the President. I just talked to him.”

“Tell me about it.”

“I’ve told you a million times. Every once in a while, since you were a baby. You were with me.” His voice softened, as he remembered. “You were just a toddler — we had to carry you.”

“What did he look like?”

“Well,” his father began, slipping into a routine he had worked out and petrified over the years, “he looked about like he does in the vidscreen. Smaller, though.”

“Why was he here?” Mike demanded avidly, although he knew every detail. The President was his hero, the man he most admired in all the world. “Why’d he come all the way out here to *our* town?”

“He was on a tour.” Bitterness crept into his father’s voice. “He happened to be passing through.”

“What kind of a tour?”

“Visiting towns all over the country.” The harshness increased. “Seeing how we were getting along. Seeing if we had bought enough NATS and bomb shelters and plague shots and gas masks and radar networks to repel attack. The General Electronics Corporation was just beginning to put up its big showrooms and displays — everything bright and glittering and expensive. The first defense equipment available for home purchase.” His lips twisted. “All on easy-payment plans. Ads, posters, searchlights, free gardenias and dishes for the ladies.”

Mike Foster’s breath panted in his throat. “That was the day we got our Preparedness Flag,” he said hungrily. “That was the day he came to give us our flag. And they ran it up on the flagpole in the middle of the town, and everybody was there yelling and cheering.”

“You remember that?”

“I — think so. I remember people and sounds. And it was hot. It was June, wasn’t it?”

“June 10,1965. Quite an occasion. Not many towns had the big green flag, then. People were still buying cars and TV sets. They hadn’t discovered those days were over. TV sets and cars are good for something — you can only manufacture and sell so many of them.”

“He gave *you* the flag, didn’t he?”

“Well, he gave it to all us merchants. The Chamber of Commerce had it arranged. Competition between towns, see who can buy the most the soonest. Improve our town and at the same time stimulate business. Of course, the way they put it, the idea was if we had to *buy* our gas masks and bomb shelters we’d take better care of them. As if we ever damaged telephones and sidewalks. Or highways, because the whole state provided them. Or armies. Haven’t there always been armies? Hasn’t the government always organized its people for defense? I guess defense costs too much. I guess they save a lot of money, cut down the national debt by this.”

“Tell me what he said,” Mike Foster whispered.

His father fumbled for his pipe and lit it with trembling hands. “He said, *”Here’s your flag, boys. You’ve done a good job.*” Bob Foster choked, as acrid pipe fumes guzzled up. “He was redfaced, sunburned, not embarrassed. Perspiring and grinning. He knew how to handle himself. He knew a lot of first names. Told a funny joke.”

The boy’s eyes were wide with awe. “He came all the way out here, and you talked to him.”

“Yeah,” his father said. “I talked to him. They were all yelling and cheering. The flag was going up, the big green Preparedness Flag.”

“You said —”

“I said to him, ‘*Is that all you brought us? A strip of green cloth?’* ” Bob Foster dragged tensely on his pipe. “That was when I became an anti-P. Only I didn’t know it at the time. All I knew was we were on our own, except for a strip of green cloth. We should have been a country, a whole nation, one hundred and seventy million people working together to defend ourselves. And instead, we’re a lot of separate little towns, little walled forts. Sliding and slipping back to the Middle Ages. Raising our separate armies —”

“Will the President ever come back?” Mike asked.

“I doubt it. He was — just passing through.”

“If he comes back,” Mike whispered, tense and not daring to hope, “can we go *see* him? Can we *look* at him?”

Bob Foster pulled himself up to a sitting position. His bony arms were bare and white; his lean face was drab with weariness. And resignation. “How much was the damn thing you saw?” he demanded hoarsely. “That bomb shelter?”

Mike’s heart stopped beating. “Twenty thousand dollars.”

“This is Thursday. I’ll go down with you and your mother next Saturday.” Bob Foster knocked out his smoldering, half-lit pipe. “I’ll get it on the easy-payment plan. The fall buying season is coming up soon. I usually do good — people buy wood furniture for Christmas gifts.” He got up abruptly from the couch. “Is it a deal?”

Mike couldn’t answer; he could only nod.

“Fine,” his father said, with desperate cheerfulness. “Now you won’t have to go down and look at it in the window.”

The shelter was installed — for an additional two hundred dollars — by a fast-working team of laborers in brown coats with the words GENERAL ELECTRONICS stitched across their backs. The back yard was quickly restored, dirt and shrubs spaded in place, the surface smoothed over, and the bill respectfully slipped under the front door. The lumbering delivery truck, now empty, clattered off down the street and the neighborhood was again silent.

Mike Foster stood with his mother and a small group of admiring neighbors on the back porch of the house. “Well,” Mrs. Carlyle said finally, “now you’ve got a shelter. The best there is.”

“That’s right,” Ruth Foster agreed. She was conscious of the people around her; it had been some time since so many had shown up at once. Grim satisfaction filled her gaunt frame, almost resentment. “It certainly makes a difference,” she said harshly.

“Yes,” Mr. Douglas from down the street agreed. “Now you have some place to go.” He had picked up the thick book of instructions the laborers had left. “It says here you can stock it for a whole year. Live down there twelve months without coming up once.” He shook his head admiringly. “Mine’s an old ‘69 model. Good for only six months. I guess maybe —”

“It’s still good enough for us,” his wife cut in, but there was a longing wistfulness in her voice. “Can we go down and peek at it, Ruth? It’s all ready, isn’t it?”

Mike made a strangled noise and moved jerkily forward. His mother smiled understandingly. “He has to go down there first. He gets first look at it — it’s really for him, you know.”

Their arms folded against the chill September wind, the group of men and women stood waiting and watching, as the boy approached the neck of the shelter and halted a few steps in front of it.

He entered the shelter carefully, almost afraid to touch anything. The neck was big for him; it was built to admit a full grown man. As soon as his weight was on the descent lift it dropped beneath him. With a breathless *whoosh* it plummeted down the pitch-black tube to the body of the shelter. The lift slammed hard against its shock absorbers and the boy stumbled from it. The lift shot back to the surface, simultaneously sealing off the subsurface shelter, an impassable steel-and-plastic cork in the narrow neck.

Lights had come on around him automatically. The shelter was bare and empty; no supplies had yet been carried down. It smelled of varnish and motor grease: below him the generators were throbbing dully. His presence activated the purifying and decontamination systems; on the blank concrete wall meters and dials moved into sudden activity.

He sat down on the floor, knees drawn up, face solemn, eyes wide. There was no sound but that of the generators; the world above was completely cut off. He was in a little self-contained cosmos; everything needed was here — or would be here, soon: food, water, air, things to do. Nothing else was wanted. He could reach out and touch — whatever he needed. He could stay here forever, through all time, without stirring. Complete and entire. Not lacking, not fearing, with only the sound of the generators purring below him, and the sheer, ascetic walls around and above him on all sides, faintly warm, completely friendly, like a living container.

Suddenly he shouted, a loud jubilant shout that echoed and bounced from wall to wall. He was deafened by the reverberation. He shut his eyes tight and clenched his fists. Joy filled him. He shouted again — and let the roar of sound lap over him, his own voice reinforced by the near walls, close and hard and incredibly powerful.

The kids in school knew even before he showed up, the next morning. They greeted him as he approached, all of them grinning and nudging each other. “Is it true your folks got a new General Electronics Model S-72ft?” Earl Peters demanded.

“That’s right,” Mike answered. His heart swelled with a peaceful confidence he had never known. “Drop around,” he said, as casually as he could. “I’ll show it to you.”

He passed on, conscious of their envious faces.

“Well, Mike,” Mrs. Cummings said, as he was leaving the classroom at the end of the day. “How does it feel?”

He halted by her desk, shy and full of quiet pride. “It feels good,” he admitted.

“Is your father contributing to the NATS?”

“Yes.” ;

“And you’ve got a permit for our school shelter?”

He happily showed her the small blue seal clamped around his wrist. “He mailed a check to the city for everything. He said, ‘As long as I’ve gone this far I might as well go the rest of the way.’ “

“Now you have everything everybody else has.” The elderly woman smiled across at him. “I’m glad of that. You’re now a pro-P, except there’s no such term. You’re just — like everyone else.”

The next day the news-machines shrilled out the news. The first revelation of the new Soviet bore-pellets.

Bob Foster stood in the middle of the living room, the newstape in his hands, his thin face flushed with fury and despair. “Goddamn it, it’s a plot!” His voice rose in baffled frenzy. “We just bought the thing and now look. *Look!”* He shoved the tape at his wife. “You see? I told you!”

“I’ve seen it,” Ruth said wildly. “I suppose you think the whole world was just waiting with you in mind. They’re always improving weapons,

Bob. Last week it was those grain-impregnation flakes. This week it's bore-pellets. You don't expect them to stop the wheels of progress because you finally broke down and bought a shelter, do you?"

The man and woman faced each other. "What the hell are we going to do?" Bob Foster asked quietly.

Ruth paced back into the kitchen. "I heard they were going to turn out adaptors."

"Adaptors! What do you mean?"

"So people won't have to buy new shelters. There was a commercial on the vidscreen. They're going to put some kind of metal grill on the market, as soon as the government approves it. They spread it over the ground and it intercepts the bore-pellets. It screens them, makes them explode on the surface, so they can't burrow down to the shelter."

"How much?"

"They didn't say."

Mike Foster sat crouched on the sofa, listening. He had heard the news at school. They were taking their test on berry-identification, examining encased samples of wild berries to distinguish the harmless ones from the toxic, when the bell had announced a general assembly. The principal read them the news about the bore-pellets and then gave a routine lecture on emergency treatment of a new variant of typhus, recently developed.

His parents were still arguing. "We'll have to get one," Ruth Foster said calmly. "Otherwise it won't make any difference whether we've got a shelter or not. The bore-pellets were specifically designed to penetrate the surface and seek out warmth. As soon as the Russians have them in production —"

“I’ll get one,” Bob Foster said. “I’ll get an anti-pellet grill and whatever else they have. I’ll buy everything they put on the market. I’ll never stop buying.”

“It’s not as bad as that.” ! ‘

“You know, this game has one real advantage over selling people cars and TV sets. With something like this we *have* to buy. It isn’t a luxury, something big and flashy to impress the neighbors, something we could do without. If we don’t buy this we die. They always said the way to sell something was create anxiety in people. Create a sense of insecurity — tell them they smell bad or look funny. But this makes a joke out of deodorant and hair oil. You can’t escape this. If you don’t buy, *they’ll kill you.* The perfect sales-pitch. Buy or die — new slogan. Have a shiny new General Electronics H-bomb shelter in your back yard or be slaughtered.”

“Stop talking like that!” Ruth snapped.

Bob Foster threw himself down at the kitchen table. “All right. I give up. I’ll go along with it.”

“You’ll get one? I think they’ll be on the market by Christmas.”

“Oh, yes,” Foster said. “They’ll be out by Christmas.” There was a strange look on his face. “I’ll buy one of the damn things for Christmas, and so will everybody else.”

The GEC grill-screen adaptors were a sensation.

Mike Foster walked slowly along the crowd-packed December street, through the late-afternoon twilight. Adaptors glittered in every store window. All shapes and sizes, for every kind of shelter. All prices, for every pocket-book. The crowds of people were gay and excited, typical Christmas crowds, shoving good-naturedly, loaded down with packages and heavy overcoats. The air was white with gusts of sweeping snow. Cars nosed

cautiously along the jammed streets. Lights and neon displays, immense glowing store windows gleamed on all sides.

His own house was dark and silent. His parents weren't home yet. Both of them were down at the store working; business had been bad and his mother was taking the place of one of the clerks. Mike held his hand up to the code-key, and the front door let him in. The automatic furnace had kept the house warm and pleasant. He removed his coat and put away his schoolbooks.

He didn't stay in the house long. His heart pounding with excitement, he felt his way out the back door and started onto the back porch.

He forced himself to stop, turn around, and reenter the house. It was better if he didn't hurry things. He had worked out every moment of the process, from the first instant he saw the low hinge of the neck reared up hard and firm against the evening sky. He had made a fine art of it; there was no wasted motion. His procedure had been shaped, molded until it was a beautiful thing. The first overwhelming sense of *presence* as the neck of the shelter came around him. Then the blood-freezing rush of air as the descent-lift hurtled down all the way to the bottom.

And the grandeur of the shelter itself.

Every afternoon, as soon as he was home, he made his way down into it, below the surface, concealed and protected in its steel silence, as he had done since the first day. Now the chamber was full, not empty. Filled with endless cans of food, pillows, books, vidtapes, audio-tapes, prints on the walls, bright fabrics, textures and colors, even vases of flowers. The shelter was his place, where he crouched curled up, surrounded by everything he needed.

Delaying things as long as possible, he hurried back through the house and rummaged in the audio-tape file. He'd sit down in the shelter until dinner, listening to *Wind in the Willows.* His parents knew where to find him; he was always down there. Two hours of uninterrupted happiness,

alone by himself in the shelter. And then when dinner was over he would hurry back down, to stay until time for bed. Sometimes late at night, when his parents were sound asleep, he got quietly up and made his way outside, to the shelter-neck, and down into its silent depths. To hide until morning.

He found the audio-tape and hurried through the house, out onto the back porch and into the yard. The sky was a bleak gray, shot with streamers of ugly black clouds. The lights of the town were coming on here and there. The yard was cold and hostile. He made his way uncertainly down the steps — and froze.

A vast yawning cavity loomed. A gaping mouth, vacant and toothless, fixed open to the night sky. There was nothing else. The shelter was gone.

He stood for an endless time, the tape clutched in one hand, the other hand on the porch railing. Night came on; the dead hole dissolved in darkness. The whole world gradually collapsed into silence and abysmal gloom. Weak stars came out; lights in nearby houses came on fitfully, cold and faint. The boy saw nothing. He stood unmoving, his body rigid as stone, still facing the great pit where the shelter had been.

Then his father was standing beside him. “How long have you been here?” his father was saying. “How long, Mike? Answer me!”

With a violent effort Mike managed to drag himself back. “You’re home early,” he muttered.

“I left the store early on purpose. I wanted to be here when you — got home.”

“It’s gone.”

“Yes.” His father’s voice was cold, without emotion. “The shelter’s gone. I’m sorry, Mike. I called them and told them to take it back.”

“Why?”

“I couldn’t pay for it. Not this Christmas, with those grills everyone’s getting. I can’t compete with them.” He broke off and then continued wretchedly, “They were damn decent. They gave me back half the money I put in.” His voice twisted ironically. “I knew if I made a deal with them before Christmas I’d come out better. They can resell it to somebody else.”

Mike said nothing.

“Try to understand,” his father went on harshly. “I had to throw what capital I could scrape together into the store. I have to keep it running. It was either give up the shelter or the store. And if I gave up the store —”

“Then we wouldn’t have anything.”

His father caught hold of his arm. “Then we’d have to give up the shelter, too.” His thin, strong fingers dug in spasmodically. “You’re growing up — you’re old enough to understand. We’ll get one later, maybe not the biggest, the most expensive, but something. It was a mistake, Mike. I couldn’t swing it, not with the goddamn adaptor things to buck. I’m keeping up the NAT payments, though. And your school tab. I’m keeping that going. This isn’t a matter of principle,” he finished desperately. “I can’t help it. Do you understand, Mike? *I had to do it.”*

Mike pulled away.

“Where are you going?” His father hurried after him. “Come back here!” He grabbed for his son frantically, but in the gloom he stumbled and fell. Stars blinded him as his head smashed into the edge of the house; he pulled himself up painfully and groped for some support.

When he could see again, the yard was empty. His son was gone.

“Mike!” he yelled. “Where are you?”

There was no answer. The night wind blew clouds of snow around him, a thin bitter gust of chilled air. Wind and darkness, nothing else.

Bill O’Neill wearily examined the clock on the wall. It was nine thirty: he could finally close the doors and lock up the big dazzling store. Push the milling, murmuring throngs of people outside and on their way home.

“Thank God,” he breathed, as he held the door open for the last old lady, loaded down with packages and presents. He threw the code bolt in place and pulled down the shade. “What a mob. I never saw so many people.”

“All done,” Al Conners said, from the cash register. “I’ll count the money — you go around and check everything. Make sure we got all of them out.”

O’Neill pushed his blond hair back and loosened his tie. He lit a cigarette gratefully, then moved around the store, checking light switches, turning off the massive GEC displays and appliances. Finally he approached the huge bomb shelter that took up the center of the floor.

He climbed the ladder to the neck and stepped onto the lift. The lift dropped with a *whoosh* and a second later he stepped out in the cavelike interior of the shelter.

In one corner Mike Foster sat curled up in a tight heap, his knees drawn up against his chin, his skinny arms wrapped around his ankles. His face was pushed down; only his ragged brown hair showed. He didn’t move as the salesman approached him, astounded.

“Jesus!” O’Neill exclaimed. “It’s that kid.”

Mike said nothing. He hugged his legs tighter and buried his head as far down as possible.

“What the hell are you doing down here?” O’Neill demanded, surprised and angry. His outrage increased. “I thought your folks got one of these.” Then he remembered. “That’s right. We had to repossess it.”

Al Conners appeared from the descent-lift. “What’s holding you up? Let’s get out of here and —” He saw Mike and broke off. “What’s he doing down here? Get him out and let’s go.”

“Come on, kid,” O’Neill said gently. “Time to go home.”

Mike didn’t move.

The two men looked at each other. “I guess we’re going to have to drag him out,” Conners said grimly. He took off his coat and tossed it over a decontamination fixture. “Come on. Let’s get it over with.”

It took both of them. The boy fought desperatley, without sound, clawing and struggling and tearing at them with his fingernails, kicking them, slashing at them, biting them when they grabbed him. They half-dragged, half-carried him to the descent-lift and pushed him into it long enough to activate the mechanism. O’Neill rode up with him; Conners came immediately after. Grimly, efficiently, they bundled the boy to the front door, threw him out, and locked the bolts after him.

“Wow,” Conners gasped, sinking down against the counter. His sleeve was torn and his cheek was cut and gashed. His glasses hung from one ear; his hair was rumpled and he was exhausted. “Think we ought to call the cops? There’s something wrong with that kid.”

O’Neill stood by the door, panting for breath and gazing out into the darkness. He could see the boy sitting on the pavement. “He’s still out there,” he muttered. People pushed by the boy on both sides. Finally one of them stopped and got him up. The boy struggled away, and then disappeared into the darkness. The larger figure picked up its packages,

hesitated a moment, and then went on. O'Neill turned away. "What a hell of a thing." He wiped his face with his handkerchief. "He sure put up a fight."

"What was the matter with him? He never said anything, not a goddamn word."

"Christmas is a hell of a time to repossess something," O'Neill said. He reached shakily for his coat. "It's too bad. I wish they could have kept it."

Conners shrugged. "No tickie, no laundry."

"Why the hell can't we give them a deal? Maybe —" O'Neill struggled to get the word out. "Maybe sell the shelter wholesale, to people like that."

Conners glared at him angrily. *"Wholesale?* And then everybody wants it wholesale. It wouldn't be fair — and how long would we stay in business? How long would GEC last that way?"

"I guess not very long," O'Neill admitted moodily.

"Use your head." Conners laughed sharply. "What you need is a good stiff drink. Come on in the back closet — I've got a fifty of Haig and Haig in a drawer back there. A little something to warm you up, before you go home. That's what you need."

Mike Foster wandered aimlessly along the dark street, among the crowds of shoppers hurrying home. He saw nothing; people pushed against him but he was unaware of them. Lights, laughing people, the honking of car horns, the clang of signals. He was blank, his mind empty and dead. He walked automatically, without consciousness or feeling.

To his right a garish neon sign winked and glowed in the deepening night shadows. A huge sign, bright and colorful.

PEACE ON EARTH GOOD WILL TO MEN

PUBLIC SHELTER ADMISSION 50¢

Pay for the Printer

Ash, black and desolate, stretched out on both sides of the road. Uneven heaps extended as far as the eye could see — the dim ruins of buildings, cities, a civilization — a corroded planet of debris, wind-whipped black particles of bone and steel and concrete mixed together in an aimless mortar.

Allen Fergesson yawned, lit a Lucky Strike, and settled back drowsily against the shiny leather seat of his ‘57 Buick. “Depressing damn sight,” he commented. “The monotony — nothing but mutilated trash. It gets you down.”

“Don’t look at it,” the girl beside him said indifferently.

The sleek, powerful car glided silently over the rubble that made up the road. His hand barely touching the power-driven wheel, Fergesson relaxed comfortably to the soothing music of a Brahms Piano Quintet filtering from the radio, a transmission of the Detroit settlement. Ash blew up against the windows — a thick coat of black had already formed, though he had gone no more than a few miles. But it didn’t matter. In the basement of her apartment, Charlotte had a green-plastic garden hose, a zinc bucket and a DuPont sponge.

“And you have a refrigerator full of good Scotch,” he added aloud. “As I recall — unless that fast crowd of yours has finished it off.”

Charlotte stirred beside him. She had drifted into half-sleep, lulled by the purr of the motor and the heavy warmth of the air. “Scotch?” she murmured. “Well, I have a fifth of Lord Calvert.” She sat up and shook back her cloud of blonde hair. “But it’s a little puddinged.”

In the back seat, their thin-faced passenger responded. They had picked him up along the way, a bony, gaunt man in coarse gray work-pants and

shirt. “How puddinged?” he asked tautly.

“About as much as everything else,” she said.

Charlotte wasn’t listening. She was gazing vacantly through the ash-darkened window at the scene outside. To the right of the road, the jagged, yellowed remains of a town jutted up like broken teeth against the sooty midday sky. A bathtub here, a couple of upright telephone poles, bones and bleak fragments, lost amid miles of pocked debris. A forlorn, dismal sight. Somewhere in the moldy cavelike cellars a few mangy dogs huddled against the chill. The thick fog of ash kept real sunlight from reaching the surface.

“Look there,” Fergesson said to the man in the back.

A mock-rabbit had bounded across the ribbon of road. He slowed the car to avoid it. Blind, deformed, the rabbit hurtled itself with sickening force against a broken concrete slab and bounced off, stunned. It crawled feebly a few paces, then one of the cellar dogs rose and crunched it.

“Ugh!” said Charlotte, revolted. She shuddered and reached to turn up the car heater. Slim legs tucked under her, she was an attractive little figure in her pink wool sweater and embroidered skirt. “I’ll be glad when we get back to my settlement. It’s not *nice* out here — “

Fergesson tapped the steel box on the seat between them. The firm metal felt good under his fingers. “They’ll be glad to get hold of these,” he said, “if things are as bad as you say.”

“Oh, yes,” Charlotte agreed. “Things are terrible. I don’t know if this will help — he’s just about useless.” Her small smooth face wrinkled with concern. “I guess it’s worth trying. But I can’t see much hope.”

“We’ll fix up your settlement,” Fergesson reassured her easily. The first item was to put the girl’s mind to rest. Panic of this kind could get out of

hand — *had* got out of hand, more than once. “But it’ll take a while,” he added, glancing at her. “You should have told us sooner.”

“We thought it was just laziness. But he’s really going, Allen.” Fear flicked in her blue eyes. “We can’t get anything good out of him anymore. He just sits there like a big lump, as if he’s sick or dead.”

“He’s old,” Fergesson said gently. “As I recall, your Biltong dates back a hundred and fifty years.”

“But they’re supposed to go on for centuries!”

“It’s a terrible drain on them,” the man in the back seat pointed out. He licked his dry lips, leaned forward tensely, his dirt-cracked hands clenched. “You’re forgetting this isn’t natural to them. On Proxima they worked together. Now they’ve broken up into separate units — and gravity is greater here.”

Charlotte nodded, but she wasn’t convinced. “Gosh!” she said plaintively. “It’s just terrible — look at this!” She fumbled in her sweater pocket and brought out a small bright object the size of a dime. “Everything he prints is like this, now — or worse.”

Fergesson took the watch and examined it, one eye on the road. The strap broke like a dried leaf between his fingers into small brittle fragments of dark fiber without tensile strength. The face of the watch looked all right — but the hands weren’t moving.

“It doesn’t run,” Charlotte explained. She grabbed it back and opened it. “See?” She held it up in front of his face, her crimson lips tight with displeasure. “I stood in line half an hour for this, and it’s just a blob!”

The works of the tiny Swiss watch were a fused, unformed mass of shiny steel. No separate wheels or jewels or springs, just a glitter of pudding.

“What did he have to go on?” the man in back asked. “An original?”

“A print — but a good print. One he did thirty-five years ago — my mother’s, in fact. How do you think I felt when I saw it? I can’t use it.” Charlotte took the puddinged watch back and restored it to her sweater pocket. “I was so mad I —” She broke off and sat up straight. “Oh, we’re here. See the red neon sign? That’s the beginning of the settlement.”

The sign read STANDARD STATIONS INC. Its colors were blue, red, and white — a spotlessly clean structure at the edge of the road. Spotless? Fergesson slowed the car as he came abreast of the station. All three of them peered out intently, stiffening for the shock they knew was coming.

“You see?” said Charlotte in a thin, clipped voice.

The gas station was crumbling away. The small white building was *old* -- old and worn, a corroded, uncertain thing that sagged and buckled like an ancient relic. The bright red neon sign sputtered fitfully. The pumps were rusted and bent. The gas station was beginning to settle back into the ash, back into black, drifting particles, back to the dust from which it had come.

As Fergesson gazed at the sinking station, the chill of death touched him. In his settlement, there was no decay — yet. As fast as prints wore out, they were replaced by the Pittsburgh Biltong. New prints were made from the original objects preserved from the War. But here, the prints that made up the settlement were not being replaced.

It was useless to blame anyone. The Biltong were limited, like any race. They had done the best they could — and they were working in an alien environment.

Probably they were indigenous to the Centaurus system. They had appeared in the closing days of the War, attracted by the H-bomb flashes — and found the remnants of the human race creeping miserably through

radioactive black ash, trying to salvage what they could of their destroyed culture.

After a period of analysis, the Biltong had separated into individual units, begun the process of duplicating surviving artifacts humans brought to them. That was their mode of survival — on their own planet, they had created an enclosing membrane of satisfactory environment in an otherwise hostile world.

At one of the gasoline pumps a man was trying to fill the tank of his ‘66 Ford. Cursing in futility, he tore the rotting hose away. Dull amber fluid poured on the ground and soaked into the grease-encrusted gravel. The pump itself spouted leaks in a dozen places. Abruptly, one of the pumps tottered and crashed in a heap.

Charlotte rolled down the car window. “The Shell station is in better shape, Ben!” she called. “At the other end of the settlement.”

The heavyset man clumped over, redfaced and perspiring. *“Damnl”* he muttered. “I can’t get a damn thing out of it. Give me a lift across town, and I’ll fill me a bucket there.”

Fergesson shakily pushed open the car door. “It’s all like this here?”

“Worse.” Ben Untermeyer settled back gratefully with their other passenger as the Buick purred ahead. “Look over there.”

A grocery store had collapsed in a twisted heap of concrete and steel supports. The windows had fallen in. Stacks of goods lay strewn everywhere. People were picking their way around, gathering up armloads, trying to clear some of the debris aside. Their faces were grim and angry.

The street itself was in bad repair, full of cracks, deep pits and eroded shoulders. A broken water main oozed slimy water in a growing pool. The stores and cars on both sides were dirty and run-down. Everything had a

senile look. A shoe-shine parlor was boarded up, its broken windows stuffed with rags, its sign peeling and shabby. A filthy cafe next door had only a couple of patrons, miserable men in rumpled business suits, trying to read their newspapers and drink the mud-like coffee from cups that cracked and dribbled ugly brown fluid as they lifted them from the worm-eaten counter.

“It can’t last much longer,” Untermeyer muttered, as he mopped his forehead. “Not at this rate. People are even scared to go into the theatre. Anyhow, the film breaks and half the time it’s upside-down.” He glanced curiously at the lean-jawed man sitting silently beside him. “My name’s Untermeyer,” he grunted.

They shook. “John Dawes,” the gray-wrapped man answered. He volunteered no more information. Since Fergesson and Charlotte had picked him up along the road, he hadn’t said fifty words.

Untermeyer got a rolled-up newspaper from his coat pocket and tossed it onto the front seat beside Fergesson. “This is what I found on the porch, this morning.”

The newspaper was a jumble of meaningless words. A vague blur of broken type, watery ink that still hadn’t dried, faint, streaked and uneven. Fergesson briefly scanned the text, but it was useless. Confused stories wandered off aimlessly, bold headlines proclaimed nonsense.

“Allen has some originals for us,” Charlotte said. “In the box there.”

“They won’t help,” Untermeyer answered gloomily. “He didn’t stir all morning. I waited in line with a pop-up toaster I wanted a print of. No dice. I was driving back home when my car began to break down. I looked under the hood, but who knows anything about motors? That’s not *our* business. I poked around and got it to run as far as the Standard station… the damn metal’s so weak I put my thumb through it.”

Fergesson pulled his Buick to a halt in front of the big white apartment building where Charlotte lived. It took him a moment to recognize it; there had been changes since he last saw it, a month before. A wooden scaffolding, clumsy and amateur, had been erected around it. A few workmen were poking uncertainly at the foundations; the whole building was sinking slowly to one side. Vast cracks yawned up and down the walls. Bits of plaster were strewn everywhere. The littered sidewalk in front of the building was roped off.

"There isn't anything we can do on our own," Untermeyer complained angrily. "All we can do is just sit and watch everything fall apart. If he doesn't come to life soon…"

"Everything he printed for us in the old days is beginning to wear out," Charlotte said, as she opened the car door and slid onto the pavement. "And everything he prints for us now is a pudding. So what are we going to do?" She shivered in the chill midday cold. "I guess we're going to wind up like the Chicago settlement."

The word froze all four of them. Chicago, the settlement that had collapsed! The Biltong printing there had grown old and died. Exhausted, he had settled into a silent, unmoving mound of inert matter. The buildings and streets around him, all the things he had printed, had gradually worn out and returned to black ash. "He didn't spawn," Charlotte whispered fearfully. "He used himself up printing, and then he just — *died."*

After a time, Fergesson said huskily, "But the others noticed. They sent a replacement as soon as they could."

"It was too late!" Untermeyer grunted. "The settlement had already gone back. All that was left were maybe a couple of survivors wandering around with nothing on, freezing and starving, and the dogs devouring them. The damn dogs, flocking from everywhere, having a regular feast!"

They stood together on the corroded sidewalk, frightened and apprehensive. Even John Dawes' lean face had a look of bleak horror on it,

a fear that cut to the bone. Fergesson thought yearningly of his own settlement, a dozen miles to the East. Thriving and virile — the Pittsburgh Biltong was in his prime, still young and rich with the creative powers of his race. Nothing like this! The buildings in the Pittsburgh settlement were strong and spotless. The sidewalks were clean and firm underfoot. In the store windows, the television sets and mixers and toasters and autos and pianos and clothing and whiskey and frozen peaches were perfect prints of the originals — authentic, detailed reproductions that couldn't be told from the actual articles preserved in the vacuum-sealed subsurface shelters.

"If this settlement goes out," Fergesson said awkwardly, "maybe a few of you can come over with us."

"Can your Biltong print for more than a hundred people?" John Dawes asked softly.

"Right now he can," Fergesson answered. He proudly indicated his Buick. "You rode in it — you know how good it is. Almost as good as the original it was printed from. You'd have to have them side by side to tell the difference." He grinned and made an old joke. "Maybe I got away with the original."

"We don't have to decide now," Charlotte said curtly. "We still have *some* time, at least." She picked up the steel box from the seat of the Buick and moved toward the steps of the apartment building. "Come on up with us, Ben." She nodded toward Dawes. "You, too. Have a shot of whiskey. It's not too bad — tastes a little like anti-freeze, and the label isn't legible, but other than that it's not too puddinged."

A workman caught her as she put a foot on the bottom step. "You can't go up, miss."

Charlotte pulled away angrily, her face pale with dismay. "My apartment's up there! All my things — this is where I *live!"*

“The building isn’t safe,” the workman repeated. He wasn’t a real workman. He was one of the citizens of the settlement, who had volunteered to guard the buildings that were deteriorating. “Look at the cracks, miss.”

“They’ve been there for weeks.” Impatiently, Charlotte waved Fergesson after her. “Come on.” She stepped nimbly up onto the porch and reached to open the big glass-and-chrome front door.

The door fell from its hinges and burst. Glass shattered everywhere, a cloud of lethal shards flying in all directions. Charlotte screamed and stumbled back. The concrete crumbled under her heels; with a groan the whole porch settled down in a heap of white powder, a shapeless mound of billowing particles.

Fergesson and the workman caught hold of the struggling girl. In the swirling clouds of concrete dust, Untermeyer searched frantically for the steel box; his fingers closed over it and he dragged it to the sidewalk.

Fergesson and the workman fought back through the ruins of the porch, Charlotte gripped between them. She was trying to speak, but her face jerked hysterically.

“My things!” she managed to whisper.

Fergesson brushed her off unsteadily. “Where are you hurt? Are you all right?”

“I’m not hurt.” Charlotte wiped a trickle of blood and white powder from her face. Her cheek was cut, and her blonde hair was a sodden mass. Her pink wool sweater was torn and ragged. Her clothes were totally ruined. “The box — have you got it?”

“It’s fine,” John Dawes said impassively. He hadn’t moved an inch from his position by the car.

Charlotte hung on tight to Fergesson — against him, her body shuddered with fear and despair. *“Look!”* she whispered. “Look at my hands.” She held up her white-stained hands. “It’s beginning to turn black.”

The thick powder streaking her hands and arms had begun to darken. Even as they watched, the powder became gray, then black as soot. The girl’s shredded clothing withered and shriveled up. Like a shrunken husk, her clothing cracked and fell away from her body.

“Get in the car,” Fergesson ordered. “There’s a blanket in there — from my settlement.”

Together, he and Untermeyer wrapped the trembling girl in the heavy wool blanket. Charlotte crouched against the seat, her eyes wide with terror, drops of bright blood sliding down her cheek onto the blue and yellow stripes of the blanket. Fergesson lit a cigarette and put it between her quivering lips.

“Thanks.” She managed a grateful half-whimper. She took hold of the cigarette shakily. “Allen, what the hell are we going to do?”

Fergesson softly brushed the darkening powder from the girl’s blonde hair. “We’ll drive over and show him the originals I brought. Maybe he can do something. They’re always stimulated by the sight of new things to print from. Maybe this’ll arouse some life in him.”

“He’s not just asleep,” Charlotte said in a stricken voice. “He’s dead, Allen. I *know* it!”

“Not yet,” Untermeyer protested thickly. But the realization was in the minds of all of them.

“Has he spawned?” Dawes asked.

The look on Charlotte's face told them the answer. "He tried to. There were a few that hatched, but none of them lived. I've seen eggs back there, but…"

She was silent. They all knew. The Biltong had become sterile in their struggle to keep the human race alive. Dead eggs, progeny hatched without life…

Fergesson slid in behind the wheel and harshly slammed the door. The door didn't close properly. The metal was sprung — or perhaps it was misshapen. His hackles rose. Here, too, was an imperfect print — a trifle, a microscopic element botched in the printing. Even his sleek, luxurious Buick was puddinged. The Biltong at his settlement was wearing out, too.

Sooner or later, what had happened to the Chicago settlement would happen to them all…

Around the park, rows of automobiles were lined up, silent and unmoving. The park was full of people. Most of the settlement was there. Everybody had something that desperately needed printing. Fergesson snapped off the motor and pocketed the keys.

"Can you make it?" he asked Charlotte. "Maybe you'd better stay here."

"I'll be all right," Charlotte said, and tried to smile.

She had put on a sports shirt and slacks that Fergesson had picked up for her in the ruins of a decaying clothing store. He felt no qualms — a number of men and women were picking listlessly through the scattered stock that littered the sidewalk. The clothing would be good for perhaps a few days.

Fergesson had taken his time picking Charlotte's wardrobe. He had found a heap of sturdy-fibered shirts and slacks in the back storeroom, material still a long way from the dread black pulverization. Recent prints? Or, perhaps — incredible but possible — originals the store owners had

used for printing. At a shoe store still in business, he found her a pair of low-heeled slippers. It was his own belt she wore — the one he had picked up in the clothing store rotted away in his hands while he was buckling it around her.

Untermeyer gripped the steel box with both hands as the four of them approached the center of the park. The people around them were silent and grim-faced. No one spoke. They all carried some article, originals carefully preserved through the centuries or good prints with only minor imperfections. On their faces were desperate hope and fear fused, in a taut mask.

“Here they are,” said Dawes, lagging behind. “The dead eggs.”

In a grove of trees at the edge of the park was a circle of gray-brown pellets, the size of basketballs. They were hard, calcified. Some were broken. Fragments of shell were littered everywhere.

Untermeyer kicked at one egg; it fell apart, brittle and empty. “Sucked dry by some animal,” he stated. “We’re seeing the end, Fergesson. I think dogs sneak in here at night, now, and get at them. He’s too weak to protect them.”

A dull undercurrent of outrage throbbed through the waiting men and women. Their eyes were red-rimmed with anger as they stood clutching their objects, jammed in together in a solid mass, a circle of impatient, indignant humanity ringing the center of the park. They had been waiting a long time. They were getting tired of waiting.

“What the hell is this?” Untermeyer squatted down in front of a vague shape discarded under a tree. He ran his fingers over the indistinct blur of metal. The object seemed melted together like wax — nothing was distinguishable. “I can’t identify it.”

“That’s a power lawnmower,” a man nearby said sullenly.

“How long ago did he print it?” Fergesson asked.

“Four days ago.” The man knocked at it in hostility. “You can’t even tell what it is — it could be anything. My old one’s worn out. I wheeled the settlement’s original up from the vault and stood in line all day — and look what I got.” He spat contemptuously. “It isn’t worth a damn. I left it sitting here — no point taking it home.”

His wife spoke up in a shrill, harsh wail. “What are we going to do? We can’t use the old one. It’s crumbling away like everything else around here. If the new prints aren’t any good, then what —”

“Shut up,” her husband snapped. His face was ugly and strained. His long-fingered hands gripped a length of pipe. “We’ll wait a little longer. Maybe he’ll snap out of it.”

A murmur of hope rippled around them. Charlotte shivered and pushed on. “I don’t blame him,” she said to Fergesson. “But…” She shook her head wearily. “What good would it do? If he won’t print copies for us that are any good…”

“He can’t,” John Dawes said. “Look at him!” He halted and held the rest of them back. “Look at him and tell me how he could do better.”

The Biltong was dying. Huge and old, it squatted in the center of the settlement park, a lump of ancient yellow protoplasm, thick, gummy, opaque. Its pseudopodia were dried up, shriveled to blackened snakes that lay inert on the brown grass. The center of the mass looked oddly sunken. The Biltong was gradually settling, as the moisture was burned from its veins by the weak overhead sun.

“Oh, dear!” Charlotte whispered. “How *awful* he looks!”

The Biltong’s central lump undulated faintly. Sickly, restless heavings were noticeable as it struggled to hold onto its dwindling life. Flies

clustered around it in dense swarms of black and shiny blue. A thick odor hung over the Biltong, a fetid stench of decaying organic matter. A pool of brackish waste liquid had oozed from it.

Within the yellow protoplasm of the creature, its solid core of nervous tissue pulsed in agony, with quick, jerky movements that sent widening waves across the sluggish flesh. Filaments were almost visibly degenerating into calcified granules. Age and decay — and suffering.

On the concrete platform, in front of the dying Biltong, lay a heap of originals to be duplicated. Beside them, a few prints had been commenced, unformed balls of black ash mixed with the moisture of the Biltong's body, the juice from which it laboriously constructed its prints. It had halted the work, pulled its still-functioning pseudopodia painfully back into itself. It was resting — and trying not to die.

"The poor damn thing!" Fergesson heard himself say. "It can't keep on."

"He's been sitting like that for six solid hours," a woman snapped sharply in Fergesson's ear. "Just sitting there! What does he expect us to do, get down on our hands and knees and *beg* him?"

Dawes turned furiously on her. "Can't you see it's dying? For God's sake, *leave it alone!"*

An ominous rumble stirred through the ring of people. Faces turned toward Dawes — he icily ignored them. Beside him, Charlotte had stiffened to a frightened ramrod. Her eyes were pale with fear.

"Be careful," Untermeyer warned Dawes softly. "Some of these boys need things pretty bad. Some of them are waiting here for food."

Time was running out. Fergesson grabbed the steel box from Untermeyer and tore it open. Bending down, he removed the originals and laid them on the grass in front of him.

At the sight, a murmur went up around him, a murmur blended of awe and amazement. Grim satisfaction knifed through Fergesson. These were originals lacking in this settlement. Only imperfect prints existed here. Printing had been done from defective duplicates. One by one, he gathered up the precious originals and moved toward the concrete platform in front of the Biltong. Men angrily blocked his way — until they saw the originals he carried.

He laid down a silver Ronson cigarette lighter. Then a Bausch and Lomb binocular microscope, still black and pebbled in its original leather. A high-fidelity Pickering phonograph cartridge. And a shimmering Steuben crystal cup.

"Those are fine-looking originals," a man nearby said enviously. "Where'd you get them?"

Fergesson didn't reply. He was watching the dying Biltong. The Biltong hadn't moved. But it had seen the new originals added to the others. Inside the yellow mass, the hard fibers raced and blurred together. The front orifice shuddered and then split open. A violent wave lashed the whole lump of protoplasm. Then from the opening, rancid bubbles oozed. A pseudopodium twitched briefly, struggled forward across the slimy grass, hesitated, touched the Steuben glass.

It pushed together a heap of black ash, wadded it with fluid from the front orifice. A dull globe formed, a grotesque parody of the Steuben cup. The Biltong wavered and drew back to gather more strength. Presently it tried once more to form the blob. Abruptly, without warning, the whole mass shuddered violently, and the pseudopodium dropped, exhausted. It twitched, hesitated pathetically, and then withdrew, back into the central bulk. "No use," Untermeyer said hoarsely. "He can't do it. It's too late." With stiff, awkward fingers, Fergesson gathered the originals together and shakily stuffed them back in the steel box. "I guess I was wrong," he muttered, climbing to his feet. "I thought this might do it. I didn't realize how far it had gone."

Charlotte, stricken and mute, moved blindly away from the platform. Untermeyer followed her through the coagulation of angry men and women, clustered around the concrete platform.

"Wait a minute," Dawes said. "I have something for him to try." Fergesson waited wearily, as Dawes groped inside his coarse gray shirt. He fumbled and brought out something wrapped in old newspaper. It was a cup, a wooden drinking cup, crude and ill-shaped. There was a strange wry smile on his face as he squatted down and placed the cup in front of the Biltong.

Charlotte watched, vaguely puzzled. "What's the use? Suppose he does make a print of it." She poked listlessly at the rough wooden object with the toe of her slipper. "It's so simple you could duplicate it yourself."

Fergesson started. Dawes caught his eye — for an instant the two men gazed at each other, Dawes smiling faintly, Fergesson rigid with burgeoning understanding.

"That's right," Dawes said. "I made it."

Fergesson grabbed the cup. Trembling, he turned it over and over. "You made it with *what?* I don't see how! What did you make it *out* of?"

"We knocked down some trees." From his belt, Dawes slid something that gleamed metallically, dully, in the weak sunlight. "Here — be careful you don't cut yourself."

The knife was as crude as the cup — hammered, bent, tied together with wire. "You made this knife?" Fergesson asked, dazed. "I can't believe it. *Where do you start?* You have to have tools to make this. It's a paradox!" His voice rose with hysteria. "It isn't *possible!"*

Charlotte turned despondently away. "It's no good — you couldn't cut anything with that." Wistfully, pathetically, she added, "In my kitchen I had

that whole set of stainless steel carving knives — the best Swedish steel. And now they're nothing but black ash."

There were a million questions bursting in Fergesson's mind. "This cup, this knife — there's a group of you? And that material you're wearing — you wove that?"

"Come on," Dawes said brusquely. He retrieved the knife and cup, moved urgently away. "We'd better get out of here. I think the end has about come."

People were beginning to drift out of the park. They were giving up, shambling wretchedly off to forage in the decaying stores for food remnants. A few cars muttered into life and rolled hesitantly away.

Untermeyer licked his flabby lips nervously. His doughy flesh was mottled and grainy with fear. "They're getting wild," he muttered to Fergesson. "This whole settlement's collapsing — in a few hours there won't be anything. No food, no place to stay!" His eyes darted toward the car, then faded to opaqueness.

He wasn't the only one who had noticed the car.

A group of men were slowly forming around the massive dusty Buick, their faces dark. Like hostile, greedy children, they poked at it intently, examining its fenders, hood, touching its headlights, its firm tires. The men had clumsy weapons — pipes, rocks, sections of twisted steel ripped from collapsing buildings.

"They know it isn't from this settlement," Dawes said. "They know it's going back."

"I can take you to the Pittsburgh settlement," Fergesson said to Charlotte. He headed toward the car. "I'll register you as my wife. You can decide later on whether you want to go through with the legalities."

“What about Ben?” Charlotte asked faintly.

“I can’t marry him, too.” Fergesson increased his pace. “I can take him there, but they won’t let him stay. They have their quota system. Later on, when they realize the emergency…”

“Get out of the way,” Untermeyer said to the cordon of men. He lumbered toward them vengefully. After a moment, the men uncertainly retreated and finally gave way. Untermeyer stood by the door, his huge body drawn up and alert.

“Bring her through — and watch it!” he told Fergesson.

Fergesson and Dawes, with Charlotte between them, made their way through the line of men to Untermeyer. Fergesson gave the fat man the keys, and Untermeyer yanked the front door open. He pushed Charlotte in, then motioned Fergesson to hurry around to the other side.

The group of men came alive.

With his great fist, Untermeyer smashed the leader into those behind him. He struggled past Charlotte and got his bulk wedged behind the wheel of the car. The motor came on with a whirr. Untermeyer threw it into low gear and jammed savagely down on the accelerator. The car edged forward. Men clawed at it crazily, groping at the open door for the man and woman inside.

Untermeyer slammed the doors and locked them. As the car gained speed, Fergesson caught a final glimpse of the fat man’s sweating, fear-distorted face.

Men grabbed vainly for the slippery sides of the car. As it gathered momentum, they slid away one by one. One huge red-haired man clung maniacally to the hood, pawing at the shattered windshield for the driver’s

face beyond. Untermeyer sent the car spinning into a sharp curve; the red-haired man hung on for a moment, then lost his grip and tumbled silently, face-forward, onto the pavement.

The car wove, careened, at last disappeared from view beyond a row of sagging buildings. The sound of its screaming tires faded. Untermeyer and Charlotte were on their way to safety at the Pittsburgh settlement.

Fergesson stared after the car until the pressure of Dawes' thin hand on his shoulder aroused him. "Well," he muttered, "there goes the car. Anyhow, Charlotte got away."

"Come on," Dawes said tightly in his ear. "I hope you have good shoes — we've got a long way to walk."

Fergesson blinked. "Walk? Where…?"

"The nearest of our camps is thirty miles from here. We can make it, I think." He moved away, and after a moment Fergesson followed him. "I've done it before. I can do it again."

Behind them, the crowd was collecting again, centering its interest upon the inert mass that was the dying Biltong. The hum of wrath sounded — frustration and impotence at the loss of the car pitched the ugly cacophony to a gathering peak of violence. Gradually, like water seeking its level, the ominous, boiling mass surged toward the concrete platform.

On the platform, the ancient dying Biltong waited helplessly. It was aware of them. Its pseudopodia were twisted in one last decrepit action, a final shudder of effort.

Then Fergesson saw a terrible thing — a thing that made shame rise inside him until his humiliated fingers released the metal box he carried, let it fall, splintering, to the ground. He retrieved it numbly, stood gripping it helplessly. He wanted to run off blindly, aimlessly, anywhere but here. Out

into the silence and darkness and driving shadows beyond the settlement. Out in the dead acres of ash.

The Biltong was trying to print himself a defensive shield, a protective wall of ash, as the mob descended on him…

When they had walked a couple of hours, Dawes came to a halt and threw himself down in the black ash that extended everywhere. “We’ll rest awhile,” he grunted to Fergesson. “I’ve got some food we can cook. We’ll use that Ronson lighter you have there, if it’s got any fluid in it.”

Fergesson opened the metal box and passed him the lighter. A cold, fetid wind blew around them, whipping ash into dismal clouds across the barren surface of the planet. Off in the distance, a few jagged walls of buildings jutted upward like splinters of bones. Here and there dark, ominous stalks of weeds grew.

“It’s not as dead as it looks,” Dawes commented, as he gathered bits of dried wood and paper from the ash around them. “You know about the dogs and the rabbits. And there’s lots of plant seeds — all you have to do is water the ash, and up they spring.”

“Water? But it doesn’t — rain. Whatever the word used to be.”

“We have to dig ditches. There’s still water, but you have to dig for it.” Dawes got a feeble fire going — there was fluid in the lighter. He tossed it back and turned his attention to feeding the fire.

Fergesson sat examining the lighter. “How can you build a thing like this?” he demanded bluntly.

“We can’t.” Dawes reached into his coat and brought out a flat packet of food — dried, salted meat and parched corn. “You can’t start out building complex stuff. You have to work your way up slowly.”

“A healthy Biltong could print from this. The one in Pittsburgh could make a perfect print of this lighter.”

“I know,” Dawes said. “That’s what’s held us back. We have to wait until they give up. They will, you know. They’ll have to go back to their own star-system — it’s genocide for them to stay here.”

Fergesson clutched convulsively at the lighter. “Then our civilization goes with them.”

“That lighter?” Dawes grinned. “Yes, that’s going — for a long time, at least. But I don’t think you’ve got the right slant. We’re going to have to re-educate ourselves, every damn one of us. It’s hard for me, too.”

“Where did you come from?”

Dawes said quietly, “I’m one of the survivors from Chicago. After it collapsed, I wandered around — killed with a stone, slept in cellars, fought off the dogs with my hands and feet. Finally, I found my way to one of the camps. There were a few before me — you don’t know it, my friend, but Chicago wasn’t the first to fall.”

“And you’re printing tools? Like that knife?”

Dawes laughed long and loud. “The word isn’t print — the word is *build.* We’re building tools, making things.” He pulled out the crude wooden cup and laid it down on the ash. “Printing means merely copying. I can’t explain to you what building is; you’ll have to try it yourself to find out. Building and printing are two totally different things.”

Dawes arranged three objects on the ash. The exquisite Steuben glassware, his own crude wooden drinking cup and the blob, the botched print the dying Biltong had attempted.

“This is the way is was,” he said, indicating the Steuben cup. “Someday it’ll be that way again… but we’re going up the right way — the hard way — step by step, until we get back there.” He carefully replaced the glassware back in its metal box. “We’ll keep it — not to copy, but as a model, as a goal. You can’t grasp the difference now, but you will.”

He indicated the crude wooden cup. “That’s where we are right now. Don’t laugh at it. Don’t say it’s not civilization. It is — it’s simple and crude, but it’s the real thing. We’ll go up from here.”

He picked up the blob, the print the Biltong had left behind. After a moment’s reflection, he drew back and hurled it away from him. The blob struck, bounced once, then broke into fragments.

“That’s nothing,” Dawes said fiercely. “Better this cup. This wooden cup is closer to that Steuben glass than any print.”

“You’re certainly proud of your little wooden cup,” Fergesson observed.

“I sure as hell am,” Dawes agreed, as he placed the cup in the metal box beside the Steuben glassware. “You’ll understand that, too, one of these days. It’ll take awhile, but you’ll get it.” He began closing the box, then halted a moment and touched the Ronson lighter.

He shook his head regretfully. “Not in our time,” he said, and closed the box. “Too many steps in between.” His lean face glowed suddenly, a flicker of joyful anticipation. “But by God, we’re moving that way!”

War Veteran

The old man sat on the park bench in the bright hot sunlight and watched the people moving back and forth.

The park was neat and clean; the lawns glittered wetly in the spray piped from a hundred shiny copper tubes. A polished robot gardener crawled here and there, weeding and plucking and gathering waste debris in its disposal slot. Children scampered and shouted. Young couples sat basking sleepily and holding hands. Groups of handsome soldiers strolled lazily along, hands in their pockets, admiring the tanned, naked girls sunbathing around the pool. Beyond the park the roaring cars and towering needle-spires of New York sparkled and gleamed.

The old man cleared his throat and spat sullenly into the bushes. The bright hot sun annoyed him; it was too yellow and it made perspiration stream through his seedy, ragged coat. It made him conscious of his grizzled chin and missing left eye. And the deep ugly burn-scar that had seared away the flesh of one cheek. He pawed fretfully at the h-loop around his scrawny neck. He unbuttoned his coat and pulled himself upright against the glowing metal slats of the bench. Bored, lonely, bitter, he twisted around and tried to interest himself in the pastoral scene of trees and grass and happily playing children.

Three blond-faced young soldiers sat down on the bench opposite him and began unrolling picnic lunch-cartons.

The old man’s thin rancid breath caught in his throat. Painfully, his ancient heart thudded, and for the first time in hours he came fully alive. He struggled up from his lethargy and focused his dim sight on the soldiers. The old man got out his handkerchief, mopped his sweat-oozing face, and then spoke to them.

“Nice afternoon.”

The soldiers glanced up briefly. “Yeah,” one said.

“They done a good job.” The old man indicated the yellow sun and the spires of the city. “Looks perfect.”

The soldiers said nothing. They concentrated on their cups of boiling black coffee and apple pie.

“Almost fools you,” the old man went on plaintively. “You boys with the seed teams?” he hazarded.

“No,” one of them said. “We’re rocketeers.”

The old man gripped his aluminum cane and said, “I was in demolition. Back in the old Ba-3 Squad.”

None of the soldiers responded. They were whispering among themselves. The girls on a bench farther down had noticed them.

The old man reached into his coat pocket and brought out something wrapped in gray torn tissue-paper. He unfolded it with shaking fingers and then got to his feet. Unsteadily, he crossed the gravel path to the soldiers. “See this?” He held out the object, a small square of glittering metal. “I won that back in ‘87. That was before your time, I guess.”

A flicker of interest momentarily roused the young soldiers. “Hey,” one whistled appreciatively. “That’s a Crystal Disc — first class.” He raised his eyes questioningly. “You won that?”

The old man cackled proudly, as he wrapped up the medal and restored it to his coat pocket. “I served under Nathan West, in the *Wind Giant.* It wasn’t until the final jump they took against us I got mine. But I was out there with my d-squad. You probably remember the day we set off our network, rigged all the way from —”

“Sorry,” one of the soldiers said vaguely. “We don’t go back that far. That must have been before our time.”

“Sure,” the old man agreed eagerly. “That was more than sixty years ago. You heard of Major Perati, haven’t you? How he rammed their covering fleet into a meteor cloud as they were converging for their final attack? And how the Ba-3 was able to hold them back months before they finally slammed us?” He swore bitterly. “We held them off. Until there wasn’t more’n a couple of us left. And then they came in like vultures. And what they found they —”

“Sorry, Pop.” The soldiers had got lithely up, collected their lunches, and were moving toward the bench of girls. The girls glanced at them shyly and giggled in anticipation. “We’ll see you some other time.”

The old man turned and hobbled furiously back to his own bench. Disappointed, muttering under his breath and spitting into the wet bushes, he tried to make himself comfortable. But the sun irritated him; and the noises of people and cars made him sick.

He sat on the park bench, eye half shut, wasted lips twisted in a snarl of bitterness and defeat. Nobody was interested in a decrepit half-blind old man. Nobody wanted to hear his garbled, rambling tales of the battles he had fought and strategies he had witnessed. Nobody seemed to remember the war that still burned like a twisting, corroding fire in the decaying old man’s brain. A war he longed to speak of, if he could only find listeners.

Vachel Patterson jerked his car to a halt and slammed on the emergency brake. “That’s that,” he said over his shoulder. “Make yourselves comfortable. We’re going to have a short wait.”

The scene was familiar. A thousand Earthmen in gray caps and armbands streamed along the street, chanting slogans, waving immense crude banners that were visible for blocks.

NO NEGOTIATION! TALK IS FOR TRAITORS!

ACTION IS FOR MEN!

DON’T TELL THEM SHOW THEM!

A STRONG EARTH IS THE BEST GUARANTEE OF PEACE!

In the back seat of the car Edwin LeMarr put aside his report tapes with a grunt of near-sighted surprise. “Why have we stopped? What is it?”

“Another demonstration,” Evelyn Cutter said distantly. She leaned back and disgustedly lit a cigarette. “Same as all of them.”

The demonstration was in full swing. Men, women, youths out of school for the afternoon, marched wild-faced, excited and intense, some with signs, some with crude weapons and in partial uniform. Along the sidewalks more and more watching spectators were being tugged along. Blue-clad policemen had halted surface traffic; they stood watching indifferently, waiting for somebody to try to interfere. Nobody did, of course. Nobody was that foolish.

“Why doesn’t the Directorate put a stop to this?” LeMarr demanded. “A couple of armored columns would finish this once and for all.”

Beside him, John V-Stephens laughed coldly. “The Directorate finances it, organizes it, gives it free time on the vidnet, even beats up people who complain. Look at those cops standing over there. Waiting for somebody to beat up.”

LeMarr blinked. “Patterson, is that true?”

Rage-distorted faces loomed up beyond the hood of the sleek ‘64 Buick. The tramp of feet made the chrome dashboard rattle; Doctor LeMarr tugged

his tapes nervously into their metal case and peered around like a frightened turtle.

“What are you worried about?” V-Stephens said harshly. “They wouldn’t touch you — you’re an Earthman. I’m the one who should be sweating.”

“They’re crazy,” LeMarr muttered. “All those morons chanting and marching —”

“They’re not morons,” Patterson answered mildly. “They’re just too trusting. They believe what they’re told, like the rest of us. The only trouble is, what *they’re* told isn’t true.”

He indicated one of the gigantic banners, a vast 3-D photograph that twisted and turned as it was carried forward. “Blame *him.* He’s the one who thinks up the lies. He’s the one who puts the pressure on the Directorate, fabricates the hate and violence — and has the funds to sell it.”

The banner showed a stern-browed white-haired gentleman, cleanshaven and dignified. A scholarly man, heavyset, in his late fifties. Kindly blue eyes, firm jawline, an impressive and respected dignitary. Under his handsome portrait was his personal slogan, coined in a moment of inspiration.

ONLY TRAITORS COMPROMISE!

“That’s Francis Gannet,” V-Stephens said to LeMarr. “Fine figure of a man, isn’t he?” He corrected himself. “Of an *Earth*man.”

“He looks so genteel,” Evelyn Cutter protested. “How could an intelligent-looking man like that have anything to do with this?”

V-Stephens bellowed with taut laughter. “His nice clean white hands are a lot filthier than any of those plumbers and carpenters marching out there.”

“But why —”

“Gannet and his group own Transplan Industries, a holding company that controls most of the export-import business of the inner worlds. If my people and the Martian people are given their independence they’ll start cutting into his trade. They’ll be competition. But as it stands, they’re bottled up in a cold-decked mercantile system.”

The demonstrators had reached an intersection. A group of them dropped their banners and sprouted clubs and rocks. They shouted orders, waved the others on, and then headed grimly for a small modern building that blinked the word COLOR-AD in neon lights.

“Oh, God,” Patterson said. “They’re after the Color-Ad office.” He grabbed at the door handle, but V-Stephens stopped him.

“You can’t do anything,” V-Stephens said. “Anyhow, nobody’s in there. They usually get advance warning.”

The rioters smashed the plate-plastic windows and poured into the swank little store. The police sauntered over, arms folded, enjoying the spectacle. From the ruined front office, smashed furniture was tossed out onto the sidewalks. Files, desks, chairs, vidscreens, ashtrays, even gay posters of happy life on the inner worlds. Acrid black fingers of smoke curled up as the store room was ignited by a hot-beam. Presently the rioters came streaming back out, satiated and happy.

Along the sidewalk, people watched with a variety of emotions. Some showed delight. Some a vague curiosity. But most showed fear and dismay. They backed hurriedly away as the wild-faced rioters pushed brutally past them, loaded down with stolen goods.

“See?” Patterson said. “This stuff is done by a few thousand, a Committee Gannet’s financing. Those in front are employees of Gannet’s factories, goon squads on extracurricular duty. They try to sound like

Mankind, but they aren't. They're a noisy minority, a small bunch of hard-working fanatics."

The demonstration was breaking up. The Color-Ad office was a dismal fire-gutted ruin; traffic had been stopped; most of downtown New York had seen the lurid slogans and heard the tramp of feet and shouted hate. People began drifting back into offices and shops, back to their daily routine.

And then the rioters saw the Venusian girl, crouched in the locked and bolted doorway.

Patterson gunned the car forward. Bucking and grinding savagely, it hurtled across the street and up on the sidewalk, toward the running knot of dark-faced hoods. The nose of the car caught the first wave of them and tossed them like leaves. The rest collided with the metal hull and tumbled down in a shapeless mass of struggling arms and legs.

The Venusian girl saw the car sliding toward her — and the Earth-people in the front seat. For a moment she crouched in paralyzed terror. Then she turned and scurried off in panic, down the sidewalk and into the milling throng that filled up the street. The rioters regrouped themselves and in an instant were after her in full cry.

"Get the webfoot!"

"Webfoots back to their own planet!"

"Earth for Earthmen!"

And beneath the chanted slogans, the ugly undercurrent of unverbalized lust and hate.

Patterson backed the car up and onto the street. His fist clamped savagely over the horn, he gunned the car after the girl, abreast with the

loping rioters and then past them. A rock crashed off the rearview window and for an instant a hail of rubbish banged and clattered. Ahead, the crowd separated aimlessly, leaving an open path for the car and the rioters. No hand was lifted against the desperately running girl as she raced sobbing and panting between parked cars and groups of people. And nobody made a move to help her. Everybody watched dull-eyed and detached. Remote spectators viewing an event in which they had no part.

“I’ll get her,” V-Stephens said. “Pull up in front of her and I’ll head her off.”

Patterson passed the girl and jammed on the brakes. The girl doubled off the street like a terrified hare. V-Stephens was out of the car in a single bound. He sprinted after her as she darted mindlessly back toward the rioters. He swept her up and then plunged back to the car. LeMarr and Evelyn Cutter dragged the two of them in; and Patterson sent the car bucking ahead.

A moment later he turned a corner, snapped a police rope, and passed beyond the danger zone. The roar of people, the flap-flap of feet against the pavement, died down behind them.

“It’s all right,” V-Stephens was saying gently and repeatedly to the girl. “We’re friends. Look, I’m a webfoot, too.”

The girl was huddled against the door of the car, green eyes wide with terror, thin face convulsed, knees pulled up against her stomach. She was perhaps seventeen years old. Her webbed fingers scrabbled aimlessly with the torn collar of her blouse. One shoe was missing. Her face was scratched, dark hair disheveled. From her trembling mouth only vague sounds came.

LeMarr took her pulse. “Her heart’s about to pop out of her,” he muttered. From his coat he took an emergency capsule and shot a narcotic into the girl’s trembling forearm. “That’ll relax her. She’s not harmed — they didn’t get to her.”

“It’s all right,” V-Stephens murmured. “We’re doctors from the City Hospital, all but Miss Cutter, who manages the files and records. Dr. LeMarr is a neurologist, Dr. Patterson is a cancer specialist, I’m a surgeon — see my hand?” He traced the girl’s forehead with his surgeon’s hand. “And I’m a Venusian, like you. We’ll take you to the hospital and keep you there for a while.”

“Did you see them?” LeMarr sputtered. “Nobody lifted a finger to help her. They just stood there.”

“They were afraid,” Patterson said. “They want to avoid trouble.”

“They can’t,” Evelyn Cutter said flatly. “Nobody can avoid this kind of trouble. They can’t keep standing on the sidelines watching. This isn’t a football game.”

“What’s going to happen?” the girl quavered.

“You better get off Earth,” V-Stephens said gently. “No Venusian is safe here. Get back to your own planet and stay there until this thing dies down.”

“Will it?” the girl gasped.

“Eventually.” V-Stephens reached down and passed her Evelyn’s cigarettes. “It can’t go on like this. We have to be free.”

“Take it easy,” Evelyn said in a dangerous voice. Her eyes faded to hostile coals. “I thought you were above all this.”

V-Stephens’ dark green face flushed. “You think I can stand idly by while my people are killed and insulted, and our interests passed over, ignored so paste-faces like Gannet can get rich on blood squeezed from —”

“Paste-face,” LeMarr echoed wonderingly. “What’s that mean, Vachel?”

“That’s their word for Earthmen,” Patterson answered. “Can it, V-Stephens. As far as we’re concerned it’s not your people and our people. We’re all the same race. Your ancestors were Earthmen who settled Venus back in the late twentieth century.”

“The changes are only minor adaptive alterations,” LeMarr assured V-Stephens. “We can still interbreed — that proves we’re the same race.”

“We can,” Evelyn Cutter said thinly. “But who wants to marry a webfoot or a crow?”

Nobody said anything for a while. The air in the car was tense with hostility as Patterson sped toward the hospital. The Venusian girl sat crouched, smoking silently, her terrified eyes on the vibrating floor.

Patterson slowed down at the check-point and showed his i.d. tab. The hospital guard signaled the car ahead and he picked up speed. As he put his tab away his fingers touched something clipped to the inside of his pocket. Sudden memory returned.

“Here’s something to take your mind off your troubles,” he said to V-Stephens. He tossed the sealed tube back to the webfoot. “Military fired it back this morning. Clerical error. When you’re through with it hand it over to Evelyn. It’s supposed to go to her, but I got interested.”

V-Stephens slit open the tube and spilled out the contents. It was a routine application for admission to a Government hospital, stamped with the number of a war-veteran. Old sweat-grimed tapes, papers torn and mutilated throughout the years. Greasy bits of metal foil that had been folded and refolded, stuffed in a shirt pocket, carried next to some filthy, hair-matted chest. “Is this important?” V-Stephens asked impatiently. “Do we have to worry over clerical trifles?”

Patterson halted the car in the hospital parking lot and turned off the motor. “Look at the number of the application,” he said, as he pushed open

the car door. “When you have time to examine it you’ll find something unusual. The applicant is carrying around an old veteran’s i.d. card — with a number that hasn’t been issued yet.”

LeMarr, hopelessly baffled, looked from Evelyn Cutter to V-Stephens, but got no explanation.

The old man’s h-loop awoke him from a fitful slumber. “David Unger,” the tinny female voice repeated. “You are wanted back at the hospital. It is requested that you return to the hospital immediately.”

The old man grunted and pulled himself up with an effort. Grabbing his aluminum cane he hobbled away from his sweat-shiny bench, toward the escape ramp of the park. Just when he was getting to sleep, shutting out the too-bright sun and the shrill laughter of children and girls and young soldiers…

At the edge of the park two shapes crept furtively into the bushes. David Unger halted and stood in disbelief, as the shapes glided past him along the path.

His voice surprised him. He was screaming at the top of his lungs, shrieks of rage and revulsion that echoed through the park, among the quiet trees and lawns. “*Webfoots!*” he wailed. He began to run clumsily after them. “Webfoots and crows! Help! Somebody help!”

Waving his aluminum cane, he hobbled after the Martian and Venusian panting wildly. People appeared, blank-faced with astonishment. A crowd formed, as the old man hurried after the terrified pair. Exhausted, he stumbled against a drinking fountain and half-fell, his cane sliding from his fingers. His shrunken face was livid; the burn-scar stood out sick and ugly against the mottled skin. His good eye was red with hate and fury. From his wasted lips saliva drooled. He waved his skinny claw-like hands futilely, as the two altereds crept into the grove of cedars toward the far end of the park.

“Stop them!” David Unger slobbered. “Don’t let them get away! What’s the matter with you? You bunch of lily-white cowards. What kind of men are you?”

“Take it easy, Pop,” a young soldier said good-naturedly. “They’re not hurting anybody.”

Unger retrieved his cane and whooshed it past the soldier’s head. “You — *talker”* he snapped. “What kind of a soldier are you?” A fit of coughing choked off his words; he bent double, struggling to breathe. “In my day,” he managed to gasp, “we poured rocket fuel on them and strung them up. We mutilated them. We cut up the dirty webfoots and crows. We showed them.”

A looming cop had stopped the pair of altereds. “Get going,” he ordered ominously. “You things got no right here.”

The two altereds scuttled past him. The cop leisurely raised his stick and cracked the Martian across the eyes. The brittle, thin-shelled head splintered, and the Martian careened on, blinded and in agony.

“That’s more like it,” David Unger gasped, in weak satisfaction.

“You evil dirty old man,” a woman muttered at him, face white with horror. “It’s people like you that make all this trouble.”

“What are you?” Unger snapped. “A crow-lover?”

The crowd melted and broke. Unger, grasping his cane, stumbled toward the exit ramp, muttering curses and abuse, spitting violently into the bushes and shaking his head.

He arrived at the hospital grounds still trembling with rage and resentment. “What do you want?” he demanded, as he came up to the big receiving desk in the center of the main lobby. “I don’t know what’s going

on around here. First you wake me out of the first real sleep I've had since I got here, and then what do I see but two webfoots walking around in broad daylight, sassy as —"

"Doctor Patterson wants you," the nurse said patiently. "Room 301." She nodded to a robot. "Take Mr. Unger down to 301."

The old man hobbled sullenly after the smoothly-gliding robot. "I thought all you tinmen were used up in the Europa battle of '88," he complained. "It don't make sense, all these lily-white boys in uniforms. Everybody wandering around having a good time, laughing and diddling girls with nothing better to do than lie around on the grass naked. Something's the matter. Something must be —"

"In here, sir," the robot said, and the door of 301 slid away.

Vachel Patterson rose slightly as the old man entered and stood fuming and gripping his aluminum cane in front of the work-desk. It was the first time he had seen David Unger face to face. Each of them sized the other up intently; the thin hawk-faced old soldier and the well-dressed young doctor, black thinning hair, horn-rimmed glasses and good-natured face. Beside his desk Evelyn Cutter stood watching and listening impassively, a cigarette between her red lips, blonde hair swept back.

"I'm Doctor Patterson, and this is Miss Cutter." Patterson toyed with the dog-eared, eroded tape strewn across his desk. "Sit down, Mr. Unger. I want to ask you a couple of questions. Some uncertainty has come up regarding one of your papers. A routine error, probably, but they've come back to me."

Unger seated himself warily. "Questions and red tape. I've been here a week and every day it's something. Maybe I should have just laid there in the street and died."

"You've been here eight days, according to this."

“I suppose so. If it says so there, must be true.” The old man’s thin sarcasm boiled out viciously. “Couldn’t put it down if it wasn’t true.”

“You were admitted as a war veteran. All costs of care and maintenance are covered by the Directorate.”

Unger bristled. “What’s wrong with that? I earned a little care.” He leaned toward Patterson and jabbed a crabbed finger at him. “I was in the Service when I was sixteen. Fought and worked for Earth all my life. Would be there yet, if I hadn’t been half killed by that dirty mop-up attack of theirs. Lucky to be alive at all.” He self-consciously rubbed the livid ruin of his face. “Looks like you weren’t even in it. Didn’t know there *was* any place got by.”

Patterson and Evelyn Cutter looked at each other. “How old are you?” Evelyn asked suddenly.

“Don’t it say?” Unger muttered furiously. “Eighty-nine.”

“And the year of your birth?”

“2154. Can’t you figure that?”

Patterson made a faint notation on the metal foil reports. “And your unit?”

At that, Unger broke loose. “The Ba-3, if maybe you’ve heard of it. Although the way things are around here, I wonder if you know there was ever a war.”

“The Ba-3,” Patterson repeated. “And you served with them how long?”

“Fifty years. Then I retired. The first time, I mean. I was sixty-six years old. Usual age. Got my pension and bit of land.”

“And they called you back?”

“Of course they called me back! Don’t you remember how the Ba-3 went back into the line, all us old guys, and damn near stopped them, the last time? You must have been just a kid, but everybody knows what we did.” Unger fumbled out his Crystal Disc first class and slammed it on the desk. “I got *that.* All us survivors did. All ten of us, out of thirty thousand.” He gathered the medal up with shaking fingers. “I was hurt bad. You see my face. Burned, when Nathan West’s battleship blew up. I was in the military hospital for a couple years. That was when they cracked Earth wide open.” The ancient hands clenched into futile fists. “We had to sit there, watching them turn Earth into a smoking ruin. Nothing but slag and ash, miles of death. No towns, no cities. We sat there, while their C-missiles whizzed by. Finally they got finished — and got us on Luna, too.”

Evelyn Cutter tried to speak, but no words came. At his work-desk Patterson’s face had turned chalk-white. “Continue,” he managed to mutter. “Go on talking.”

“We hung on there, subsurface, down under the Copernicus crater, while they slammed their C-missiles into us. We held out maybe five years. Then they started landing. Me and those still left took off in high-speed attack torpedoes, set up pirate bases among the outer planets.” Unger twitched restlessly. “I hate to talk about that part. Defeat, the end of everything. Why do you ask me? I helped build 3-4-9-5, the best artibase of the lot. Between Uranus and Neptune. Then I retired again. Until the dirty rats slid in and *leisurely* blew it to bits. Fifty thousand men, women, kids. The whole colony.”

“You escaped?” Evelyn Cutter whispered.

“Of course I escaped! I was on patrol. I got one of those webfoot ships. Shot it down and watched them die. It made me feel a little better. I moved over to 3-6-7-7 for a few years. Until it was attacked. That was early this month. I was fighting with my back to the wall.” The dirty yellow teeth

glinted in agony. “No place to escape to, that time. None that I knew of.” The red-rimmed eye surveyed the luxurious office. “Didn’t know about this. You people sure done a good job fixing up your artibase. Looks almost like I remember the real Earth. A little too fast and bright; not so peaceful as Earth really was. But you even got the smell of the air the same.”

There was silence.

“Then you came here after — that colony was destroyed?” Patterson asked hoarsely.

“I guess so.” Unger shrugged wearily. “Last I remember was the bubble shattering and the air and heat and grav leaking out. Crow and webfoot ships landing everywhere. Men dying around me. I was knocked out by the concussion. The next thing I knew I was lying out in the street here, and some people were getting me to my feet. A tinman and one of your doctors took me here.”

Patterson let out a deep shuddering breath. “I see.” His fingers plucked aimlessly at the eroded, sweat-grimed i.d. papers. “Well, that explains this irregularity.”

“Ain’t it all there? Is something missing?”

“All your papers are here. Your tube was hanging around your wrist when they brought you in.”

“Naturally.” Unger’s bird-like chest swelled with pride. “I learned that when I was sixteen. Even when you’re dead you have to have that tube with you. Important to keep the records straight.”

“The records are straight,” Patterson admitted thickly. “You can go back to your room. Or the park. Anywhere.” He waved and the robot calmly escorted the withered old man from the office and out into the hall.

As the door slid shut Evelyn Cutter began swearing slowly and monotonously. She crushed out her cigarette with her sharp heel and paced wildly back and forth. “Good God what have we got ourselves into?”

Patterson snatched up the intervid, dialed outside, and said to the supra-plan monitor, “Get me military headquarters. Right away.”

“At Luna, sir?”

“That’s right,” Patterson said. “At the main base on Luna.”

On the wall of the office, past the taut, pacing figure of Evelyn Cutter, the calendar read August 4, 2169. If David Unger was born in 2154 he would be a boy of fifteen. And he *had* been born in 2154. It said so on his battered, yellowed, sweat-stained cards. On the i.d. papers carried through a war that hadn’t yet happened.

“He’s a veteran, all right,” Patterson said to V-Stephens. “Of a war that won’t begin for another month. No wonder his application was turned back by the IBM machines.”

V-Stephens licked his dark green lips. “This war will be between Earth and the two colony planets. And Earth will lose?”

“Unger fought through the whole war. He saw it from the start to finish — to the total destruction of Earth.” Patterson paced over to the window and gazed out. “Earth lost the war and the race of Earthmen was wiped out.”

From the window of V-Stephens’ office, Patterson could see the city spread out. Miles of buildings, white and gleaming in the late afternoon sun. Eleven million people. A gigantic center of commerce and industry, the economic hub of the system. And beyond it, a world of cities and farms and highways, three billion men and women. A thriving, healthy planet, the mother world from which the altereds had originally sprung, the ambitious

settlers of Venus and Mars. Endless cargo carriers lumbered between Earth and the colonies, weighed down with minerals and ores and produce. And already, survey teams were poking around the outer planets, laying claim in the Directorate's name to new sources of raw-materials.

"He saw all this go up in radioactive dust," Patterson said. "He saw the final attack on Earth that broke our defenses. And then they wiped out the Lunar base."

"You say some brass hats are on their way here from Luna?"

"I gave them enough of the story to start them moving. It usually takes weeks to stir up those fellows."

"I'd like to see this Unger," V-Stephens said thoughtfully. "Is there some way I can —"

"You've seen him. You revived him, remember? When he was originally found and brought in."

"Oh," V-Stephens said softly. "That filthy old man?" His dark eyes flickered. "So that's Unger… the veteran of the war we're going to fight."

"The war you're going to win. The war Earth is going to lose." Patterson abruptly left the window. "Unger thinks this is an artificial satellite someplace between Uranus and Neptune. A reconstruction of a small part of New York — a few thousand people and machines under a plastic dome. He has no conception of what's actually happened to him. Somehow, he must have been hurled back along his time-track."

"I suppose the release of energy… and maybe his frantic desire to escape. But even so, the whole thing is fantastic. It has a sort of —" V-Stephens groped for the word. "— a sort of mystic ring to it. What the hell is this, a visitation? A prophet from heaven?"

The door opened and V-Rafia slid in. “Oh,” she said, as she saw Patterson. “I didn’t know —”

“That’s all right.” V-Stephens nodded her inside his office. “You remember Patterson. He was with us in the car when we picked you up.”

V-Rafia looked much better than she had a few hours before. Her face was no longer scratched, her hair was back in place, and she had changed to a crisp gray sweater and skirt. Her green skin sparkled as she moved over beside V-Stephens, still nervous and apprehensive. “I’m staying here,” she said defensively to Patterson. “I can’t go back out there, not for a while.” She darted a quick glance of appeal at V-Stephens.

“She has no family on Earth,” V-Stephens explained. “She came here as a Class-2 biochemist. She’s been working over at a Westinghouse lab outside Chicago. She came to New York on a shopping trip, which was a mistake.”

“Can’t she join the V-colony at Denver?” Patterson asked.

V-Stephens flushed. “You don’t want another webfoot around here?”

“What can she do? We’re not an embattled fortress. There’s no reason why we can’t shoot her to Denver in a fast freight rocket. Nobody’ll interfere with that.”

“We can discuss it later,” V-Stephens said irritably. “We’ve got more important things to talk about. You’ve made a check of Unger’s papers? You’re certain they’re not forgeries? I suppose it’s possible this is on the level, but we have to be certain.”

“This has to be kept quiet,” Patterson said urgently, with a glance at V-Rafia. “Nobody on the outside should be brought in.”

“You mean me?” V-Rafia asked hesitantly. “I guess I better leave.”

“Don’t leave,” V-Stephens said, grabbing hold of her arm roughly. “Patterson, you can’t keep this quiet. Unger’s probably told it to fifty people; he sits out there on his park bench all day, buttonholing everybody who passes.”

“What is this?” V-Rafia asked curiously.

“Nothing important,” Patterson said warningly.

“Nothing important?” V-Stephens echoed. “Just a little war. Programs for sale in advance.” Across his face a spasm of emotion passed, excitement and yearning hunger pouring up from inside him. “Place your bets *now.* Don’t take chances. Bet on a sure thing, sweetheart. After all, it’s history. Isn’t that right?” He turned toward Patterson, his expression demanding confirmation. “What do you say? I can’t stop it — you can’t stop it. Right?”

Patterson nodded slowly. “I guess you’re right,” he said unhappily. And swung with all his strength.

He caught V-Stephens slightly to one side, as the Venusian scrambled away. V-Stephens’ cold-beam came out; he aimed with shaky fingers. Patterson kicked it from his hands and dragged him to his feet. “It was a mistake, John,” he panted. “I shouldn’t have showed you Unger’s i.d. tube. I shouldn’t have let you know.”

“That’s right,” V-Stephens managed to whisper. His eyes were blank with sorrow as he focused on Patterson. “Now I know. Now we both know. *You’re going to lose the rear.* Even if you lock Unger up in a box and sink him to the center of the Earth, it’s too late. Color-Ad will know as soon as I’m out of here.”

“They burned down the Color-Ad office in New York.”

“Then I’ll find the one in Chicago. Or Baltimore. I’ll fly back to Venus, if I have to. I’m going to spread the good news. It’ll be hard and long, but we’ll win. And you can’t do anything about it.”

“I can kill you,” Patterson said. His mind was racing frantically. It wasn’t too late. If V-Stephens were contained, and David Unger turned over to the Military —

“I know what you’re thinking,” V-Stephens gasped. “If Earth doesn’t fight, if you avoid war, you may still have a chance.” His green lips twisted savagely. “You think we’d *let* you avoid war? Not now! Only traitors compromise, according to you. Now it’s too late!”

“Only too late,” Patterson said, “if you get out of here.” His hand groped on the desk and found a steel paper weight. He drew it to him — and felt the smooth tip of the cold-beam in his ribs.

“I’m not sure how this thing words,” V-Rafia said slowly, “but I guess there’s only this one button to press.”

“That’s right,” V-Stephens said, with relief. “But don’t press it yet. I want to talk to him a few minutes more. Maybe he can be brought around to rationality.” He pulled himself gratefully out of Patterson’s grip and moved back a few paces, exploring his cut lip and broken front teeth. “You brought this on yourself, Vachel.”

“This is insane,” Patterson snapped, his eyes on the snout of the cold-beam as it wavered in V-Rafia’s uncertain fingers. “You expect us to fight a war we know we’re going to lose?”

“You won’t have a choice.” V-Stephens’ eyes gleamed. “We’ll make you fight. When we attack your cities you’ll come back at us. It’s — human nature.”

The first blast of the cold-beam missed Patterson. He floundered to one side and grabbed for the girl’s slim wrist. His fingers caught air, and then he

was down, as the beam hissed again. V-Rafia retreated, eyes wide with fright and dismay, aiming blindly for his rising body. He leaped up, hands extended for the terrified girl. He saw her fingers twist, saw the snout of the tube darken as the field clicked on. And that was all.

From the kicked-open door, the blue-clad soldiers caught V-Rafia in a crossfire of death. A chill breath mushroomed in Patterson's face. He collapsed back, arms up frantically, as the frigid whisper glided past him.

V-Rafia's trembling body danced briefly, as the cloud of absolute cold glowed around her. Then abruptly she halted as rigid as if the tape-track of her life had stopped in the projector. All color drained from her body. The bizarre imitation of a still-standing human figure stood silently, one arm raised, caught in the act of futile defense.

Then the frozen pillar burst. The expanded cells ruptured in a shower of crystalline particles that were hurled sickeningly into every part of the office.

Francis Gannet moved cautiously in behind the troops, redfaced and perspiring. "You're Patterson?" he demanded. He held out his heavy hand, but Patterson didn't take it. "The Military people notified me as a matter of course. Where's this old man?"

"Somewhere around," Patterson muttered. "Under guard." He turned toward V-Stephens and briefly their eyes met. "You see?" he said huskily. "This is what happens. Is this what you really want?"

"Come on, Mr. Patterson," Francis Gannet boomed impatiently. "I don't have much time to waste. From your description this sounds like something important."

"It is," V-Stephens answered calmly. He wiped at the trickle of mouth-blood with his pocket handkerchief. "It's worth the trip from Luna. Take my word for it — I *know.*"

The man who sat on Gannet's right was a lieutenant. He gazed in mute awe at the vidscreen. His young, handsome blond face was alive with amazement as from the bank of gray haze a huge battleship lumbered, one reactor smashed, its forward turrets crumpled, hull twisted open.

"Good God," Lieutenant Nathan West said faintly. "That's the *Wind Giant.* The biggest battleship we have. Look at it — it's out of commission. Totally disabled."

"That will be your ship," Patterson said. "You'll be commander of it in '87 when it's destroyed by the combined Venusian and Martian fleets. David Unger will be serving under you. You'll be killed, but Unger will escape. The few survivors of your ship will watch from Luna as Earth is systematically demolished by C-missiles from Venus and Mars."

On the screen, the figures leaped and swirled like fish in the bottom of a dirt-saturated tank. A violent maelstrom surged in the center, a vortex of energy that lashed the ships on vast spasms of motion. The silver Earth ships hesitated, then broke. Flashing black Mars battleships swept through the wide breach — and the Earth flank was turned simultaneously by the waiting Venusians. Together, they caught the remnants of the Earth ships in steel pincers and crunched them out of existence. Brief puffs of light, as the ships winked out of being. In the distance, the solemn blue and green orb that was Earth slowly and majestically revolved.

Already, it showed ugly pocks. Bomb craters from the C-missiles that had penetrated the defense network.

LeMarr snapped off the projector and the screen died. "That ends that brain-sequence. All we can get are visual fragments like this, brief instants that left strong impressions on him. We can't get continuity. The next one takes up years later, on one of the artificial satellites."

The lights came on, and the group of spectators moved stiffly to their feet. Gannet's face was a sickly putty-gray. "Doctor LeMarr, I want to see

that shot again. The one of Earth." He gestured helplessly. "You know which one I mean."

The lights dimmed and again the screen came to life. This time it showed only Earth, a receding orb that fell behind as the high-velocity torpedo on which David Unger rode hurtled toward outer space. Unger had placed himself so his dead world would be visible to the last.

Earth was a ruin. Involuntarily, a gasp rose from the group of watching officers. Nothing lived. Nothing moved. Only dead clouds of radioactive ash billowed aimlessly over the crater-pocked surface. What had been a living planet of three billion people was a charred cinder of ash. Nothing remained but heaps of debris, dispersed and blown dismally across vacant seas by the howling, ceaseless wind.

"I suppose some kind of vegetable life will take over," Evelyn Cutter said harshly, as the screen faded and the overhead lights returned. She shuddered violently and turned away.

"Weeds, maybe," LeMarr said. "Dark dry weeds poking up through the slag. Maybe some insects, later on. Bacteria, of course. I suppose in time bacterial action will transform the ash into usable soil. And it'll rain for a billion years."

"Let's face it," Gannet said. "The webfoots and crows will resettle it. They'll be living here on Earth after we're all dead."

"Sleeping in our beds?" LeMarr inquired mildly. "Using our bathrooms and sitting rooms and transports?"

"I don't understand you," Gannet answered impatiently. He waved Patterson over. "You're sure nobody knows but we here in this room?"

"V-Stephens knows," Patterson said. "But he's locked up in the psychotic ward. V-Rafia knew. She's dead."

Lieutenant West came over to Patterson. “Could we interview him?”

“Yes, where’s Unger?” Gannet demanded. “My staff is eager to meet him face to face.”

“You have all the essential facts,” Patterson answered. “You know how the war is going to come out. You know what’s going to happen to Earth.”

“What do you suggest?” Gannet asked warily.

“Avoid the war.”

Gannet shrugged his plump well-fed body. “After all, you can’t change history. And this is future history. We have no choice but to go ahead and fight.”

“At least we’ll get our share of them,” Evelyn Cutter said icily.

“What are you talking about?” LeMarr stuttered excitedly. “You work in a hospital and you talk like that?”

The woman’s eyes blazed. “You saw what they did to Earth. You saw them cut us to ribbons.”

“We have to stand above this,” LeMarr protested. “If we allow ourselves to get dragged into this hate and violence — ” He appealed to Patterson. “Why is V-Stephens locked up? He’s no crazier than she is.”

“True,” Patterson agreed. “But she’s crazy on *our* side. We don’t lock up that kind of lunatic.”

LeMarr moved away from him. “Are you going out and fight, too? Alongside Gannet and his soldiers?”

“I want to avoid the war,” Patterson said dully.

“Can it be done?” Gannet demanded. An avid glow winked briefly behind his pale, blue eyes and then faded out.

“Maybe it can be done. Why not? Unger coming back here adds a new element.”

“If the future can be changed,” Gannet said slowly, “then maybe we have a choice of various possibilities. If there’s two possible futures there may be an infinite number. Each branching off at a different point.” A granite mask slid over his face. “We can use Unger’s knowledge of the battles.”

“Let me talk to him,” Lieutenant West interrupted excitedly. “Maybe we can get a clear idea of the webfoot battle-strategy. He’s probably gone over the battles in his mind a thousand times.”

“He’d recognize you,” Gannet said. “After all, he served under your command.”

Patterson was deep in thought. “I don’t think so,” he said to West. “You’re a lot older than David Unger.”

West blinked. “What do you mean? He’s a broken-down old man and I’m still in my twenties.”

“David Unger is fifteen,” Patterson answered. “At this point you’re almost twice his age. You’re already a commissioned officer on the Lunar policy-level staff. Unger isn’t even in the Military Service. He’ll volunteer when war breaks out, as a buck private without experience or training. When you’re an old man, commanding the *Wind Giant*, David Unger will be a middle-aged nonentity working one of the gun turrets, a name you won’t even know.”

“Then Unger is already alive?” Gannet said, puzzled.

“Unger is someplace around, waiting to step onto the stage.” Patterson filed the thought away for future study; it might have valuable possibilities. “I don’t think he’ll recognize you, West. He may never even have seen you. The *Wind Giant* is a big ship.”

West quickly agreed. “Put a bug-system on me, Gannet. So the command staff can have the aud and vid images of what Unger says.”

In the bright mid-morning sunlight, David Unger sat moodily on his park bench, gnarled fingers gripping his aluminum cane, gazing dully at the passers-by.

To his right a robot gardener worked over the same patch of grass again and again, its metallic eye-lenses intently fastened on the wizened, hunched-over figure of the old man. Down the gravel path a group of loitering men sent random comments to the various monitors scattered through the park, keeping the relay system open. A bare-bosomed young woman sunbathing by the pool nodded faintly to a pair of soldiers pacing around the park, within constant sight of David Unger.

That morning there were a hundred people in the park. All were integrated elements of the screen surrounding the half-dozing, resentful old man.

“All right,” Patterson said. His car was parked at the edge of the plot of green trees and lawns. “Remember not to overexcite him. V-Stephens revived him originally. If something goes wrong with his heart we can’t get V-Stephens to pump him back.”

The blond young lieutenant nodded, straightened his immaculate blue tunic and slid onto the sidewalk. He pushed his helmet back and briskly strode down the gravel path, toward the center of the park. As he

approached, the lounging figures moved imperceptibly. One by one they took up positions on the lawns, on the benches, in groups here and there around the pool.

Lieutenant West stopped at a drinking-fountain and allowed the robot water-brain to find his mouth with a jet of ice-cold spray. He wandered slowly away and stood for a moment, arms loose at his sides, vacantly watching a young woman as she removed her clothes and stretched out languidly on a multi-colored blanket. Her eyes shut, red lips parted, the woman relaxed with a grateful sigh.

"Let him speak to you first," she said faintly, to the lieutenant standing a few feet from her, one black boot on the edge of a bench. "Don't start the conversation."

Lieutenant West watched her a moment longer and then continued along the path. A passing heavyset man said swiftly in his ear. "Not so fast. Take your time and don't appear to hurry."

"You want to give the impression you have all day," a hatchet-faced nurse greeted, as she passed him wheeling a baby carriage.

Lieutenant West slowed almost to a halt. He aimlessly kicked a bit of gravel from the path into the wet bushes. Hands deep in his pockets he wandered over to the central pool and stood gazing absently into its depths. He lit a cigarette, then bought an ice cream bar from a passing robot salesman.

"Spill some on your tunic, sir," the robot's speaker instructed faintly. "Swear and start dabbing at it."

Lieutenant West let the ice cream melt in the warm summer sun. When some had dripped down his wrist onto his starched blue tunic he scowled, dug out his handkerchief, dipped it in the pool, and began clumsily to wipe the ice cream away.

On his bench, the scar-faced old man watched with his one good eye, gripping his aluminum cane and cackling happily. “Watch out,” he wheezed. “Look out there!”

Lieutenant West glanced up in annoyance.

“You’re dripping more,” the old man cackled, and lay back in weak amusement, toothless mouth slack with pleasure.

Lieutenant West grinned good-naturedly. “I guess so,” he admitted. He dropped the melting half-eaten ice cream bar into a disposal slot and finished cleaning his tunic. “Sure is warm,” he observed, wandering vaguely over.

“They do a good job,” Unger agreed, nodding his bird-like head. He peered and craned his neck, trying to make out the insignia markings on the young soldier’s shoulder. “You with the rocketeers?”

“Demolition,” Lieutenant West said. As of that morning his insignia had been changed. “Ba-3.”

The old man shuddered. He hawked and spat feverishly into the nearby bushes. “That so?” He half-rose, excited and fearful, as the lieutenant started to move away. “Say, you know, I was in the Ba-3 years ago.” He tried to make his voice sound calm and casual. “Long before your time.”

Amazement and disbelief slid over Lieutenant West’s handsome blond face. “Don’t kid me. Only a couple guys from the old group are still alive. You’re pulling my leg.”

“I was, I was,” Unger wheezed, fumbling with trembling haste at his coat pocket. “Say, look at this. Stop a minute and I’ll show you something.” Reverent and awed, he held out his Crystal Disc. “See? You know what this is?”

It Lieutenant West gazed down at the metal a long time. Real emotion welled up inside him; he didn't have to counterfeit it. "Can I examine it?" he asked finally.

Unger hesitated. "Sure," he said. "Take it."

"That's right," Unger said. "You remember?" He returned it to his pocket. "No, you weren't even alive, then. But you heard about it, haven't you?"

"Yes," West said. "I've heard about it many times."

"And you haven't forgotten? A lot of people forgot that, what we did there."

"I guess we took a beating that day," West said. He sat down slowly on the bench beside the old man. "That was a bad day for Earth."

"We lost," Unger agreed. "Only a few of us got out of there. I got to Luna. I saw Earth go, piece by piece, until there was nothing left. It broke my heart. I cried until I lay like a dead thing. We were all weeping, soldiers, workmen, standing there helpless. And then they turned their missiles on us."

The lieutenant licked his dry lips. "Your Commander didn't get out, did he?"

"Nathan West died on his ship," Unger said. "He was the finest commander in the line. They didn't give him the *Wind Giant* for nothing." His ancient, withered features dimmed in recollection. "There'll never be another man like West. I saw him, once. Big stern-faced man, wide-shouldered. A giant himself. He was a great old man. Nobody could have done better."

West hesitated. “You think if somebody else had been in command —”

“No!” Unger shrieked. “Nobody could have done better! I’ve heard it said — I know what some of those fat-bottomed armchair strategists say. But they’re wrong! Nobody could have won that battle. We didn’t have a chance. We were outnumbered five to one — two huge fleets, one straight at our middle and the other waiting to chew us up and swallow us.”

“I see,” West said thickly. Reluctantly he continued, in an agony of turmoil, “These armchair men, what the hell is it they say? I never listen to the brass.” He tried to grin but his face refused to respond. “I know they’re always saying we could have won the battle and maybe even saved the *Wind Giant*, but —”

“Look here,” Unger said fervently, his sunken eye wild and glittering. With the point of his aluminum cane he began gouging harsh, violent ditches in the gravel by his feet. “This line is our fleet. Remember how West had it drawn up? It was a mastermind arranged our fleet, that day. A genius. We held them off for twelve hours before they busted through. Nobody thought we’d have a chance of even doing that.” Savagely, Unger gouged another line. “That’s the crow fleet.”

“I see,” West muttered. He leaned over so his chest-lens would vid the rough lines in the gravel back to the scanning center in the mobile unit circling lazily overhead. And from there to main headquarters on Luna. “And the webfoot fleet?”

Unger glanced cagily at him, suddenly shy. “I’m not boring you, am I? I guess an old man likes to talk. Sometimes I bother people, trying to take up their time.”

“Go on,” West answered. He meant what he said. “Keep drawing — I’m watching.”

Evelyn Cutter paced restlessly around her softly-lit apartment, arms folded, red lips tight with anger. “I don’t understand you!” She paused to

lower the heavy drapes. “You were willing to kill V-Stephens a little while ago. Now you won’t even help block LeMarr. You know LeMarr doesn’t grasp what’s happening. He dislikes Gannet and he prattles about the interplan community of scientists, our duty to all mankind and that sort of stuff. Can’t you see if V-Stephens gets hold of him —”

“Maybe LeMarr is right,” Patterson said. “I don’t like Gannet either.”

Evelyn exploded. “They’ll destroy us! We can’t fight a war with them — we don’t have a chance.” She halted in front of him, eyes blazing. “But they don’t know that yet. We’ve got to neutralize LeMarr, at least for a while. Every minute he’s walking around free puts our world in jeopardy. Three billion lives depend on keeping this suppressed.”

Patterson was brooding. “I suppose Gannet briefed you on the initial exploration West conducted today.”

“No results so far. The old man knows every battle by heart, and we lost them all.” She rubbed her forehead wearily. “I mean, we *will* lose them all.” With numb fingers she gathered up the empty coffee cups. “Want some more coffee?”

Patterson didn’t hear her; he was intent on his own thoughts. He crossed over to the window and stood gazing out until she returned with fresh coffee, hot and black and steaming.

“You didn’t see Gannet kill that girl,” Patterson said.

“What girl? That webfoot?” Evelyn stirred sugar and cream into her coffee. “She was going to kill you. V-Stephens would have lit out for Color-Ad and the war would begin.” Impatiently, she pushed his coffee cup to him — “Anyhow, that was the girl we saved.”

“I know,” Patterson said. “That’s why it bothers me.” He took the coffee automatically and sipped without tasting. “What was the point of dragging

her from the mob? Gannet's work. We're employees of Gannet."

"So?"

"You know what kind of game he's playing!"

Evelyn shrugged. "I'm just being practical. I don't want Earth destroyed. Neither does Gannet — he wants to avoid the war."

"He wanted war a few days ago. When he expected to win."

Evelyn laughed sharply. "Of course! Who'd fight a war they knew they'd lose? That's irrational."

"Now Gannet will hold off the war," Patterson admitted slowly. "He'll let the colony planets have their independence. He'll recognize Color-Ad. He'll destroy David Unger and everybody who knows. He'll pose as a benevolent peacemaker."

"Of course. He's already making plans for a dramatic trip to Venus. A last minute conference with Color-Ad officials, to prevent war. He'll put pressure on the Directorate to back down and let Mars and Venus sever. He'll be the idol of the system. But isn't that better than Earth destroyed and our race wiped out?"

"Now the big machine turns around and roars *against* war." Patterson's lips twisted ironically. "Peace and compromise instead of hate and destructive violence."

Evelyn perched on the arm of a chair and made rapid calculations. "How old was David Unger when he joined the Military?"

"Fifteen or sixteen."

“When a man joins the Service he gets his i.d. number, doesn’t he?”

“That’s right. So?”

“Maybe I’m wrong, but according to my figures —” She glanced up. “Unger should appear and claim his number, soon. That number will be coming up any day, according to how fast the enlistments pour in.”

A strange expression crossed Patterson’s face. “Unger is already alive… a fifteen year old kid. Unger the youth and Unger the senile old war veteran. Both alive at once.”

Evelyn shuddered. “It’s weird. Suppose they ran into each other? There’d be a lot of difference between them.”

In Patterson’s mind a picture of a bright-eyed youth of fifteen formed. Eager to get into the fight. Ready to leap in and kill webfoots and crows with idealistic enthusiasm. At this moment, Unger was moving inexorably toward the recruiting office… and the half-blind, crippled old relic of eighty-nine wretched years was creeping hesitantly from his hospital room to his park bench, hugging his aluminum cane, whispering in his raspy, pathetic voice to anyone who would listen.

“We’ll have to keep our eyes open,” Patterson said. “You better have somebody at Military notify you when that number comes up. When Unger appears to claim it.”

Evelyn nodded. “It might be a good idea. Maybe we should request the Census Department to make a check for us. Maybe we can locate —”

She broke off. The door of the apartment had swung silently open. Edwin LeMarr stood gripping the knob, blinking red-eyed in the half-light. Breathing harshly, he came into the room. “Vachel, I have to talk to you.”

“What is it?” Patterson demanded. “What’s going on?”

LeMarr shot Evelyn a look of pure hate. “He found it. I knew he would. As soon as he can get it analyzed and the whole thing down on tape —”

“Gannet?” Cold fear knifed down Patterson’s spine. “Gannet found what?”

“The moment of crisis. The old man’s babbling about a five-ship convoy. Fuel for the crow warfleet. Unescorted and moving toward the battle line. Unger says our scouts will miss it.” LeMarr’s breathing was hoarse and frenzied. “He says if we knew in advance —” He pulled himself together with a violent effort. “Then we could destroy it.”

“I see,” Patterson said. “And throw the balance in Earth’s favor.”

“If West can plot the convoy route,” LeMarr finished, “Earth will win the war. That means Gannet will fight — as soon as he gets the exact information.”

V-Stephens sat crouched on the single-piece bench that served as chair and table and bed for the psychotic ward. A cigarette dangled between his dark green lips. The cube-like room was ascetic, barren. The walls glittered dully. From time to time V-Stephens examined his wristwatch and then turned his attention back to the object crawling up and down the sealed edges of the entrance-lock.

The object moved slowly and cautiously. It had been exploring the lock for twenty-nine hours straight; it had traced down the power leads that kept the heavy plate fused in place. It had located the terminals at which the leads joined the magnetic rind of the door. During the last hour it had cut its way through the rexeroid surface to within an inch of the terminals. The crawling, exploring object was V-Stephens’ surgeon-hand, a self-contained robot of precision quality usually joined to his right wrist.

It wasn’t joined there now. He had detached it and sent it up the face of the cube to find a way out. The metal fingers clung precariously to the

smooth dull surface, as the cutting-thumb laboriously dug its way in. It was a big job for the surgeon-hand; after this it wouldn’t be of much use at the operating table. But V-Stephens could easily get another — they were for sale at any medical supply house on Venus.

The forefinger of the surgeon-hand reached the anode terminal and paused questioningly. All four fingers rose erect and waved like insect antennae. One by one they fitted themselves into the cut slot and probed for the nearby cathode lead.

Abruptly there was a blinding flash. A white acrid cloud billowed out, and then came a sharp *pop*. The entrance-lock remained motionless as the hand dropped to the floor, its work done. V-Stephens put out his cigarette, got leisurely to his feet, and crossed the cube to collect it.

With the hand in place and acting as part of his own neuromuscular system again, V-Stephens gingerly grasped the lock by its perimeter and after a moment pulled inward. The lock came without resistance and he found himself facing a deserted corridor. There was no sound or motion. No guards. No check-system on the psych patients. V-Stephens loped quickly ahead, around a turn, and through a series of connecting passages.

In a moment he was at a wide view-window, overlooking the street, the surrounding buildings, and the hospital grounds.

He assembled his wristwatch, cigarette lighter, fountain pen, keys and coins. From them his agile flesh and metal fingers rapidly formed an intricate gestalt of wiring and plates. He snapped off the cutting-thumb and screwed a heat-element in its place. In a brief flurry he had fused the mechanism to the underside of the window ledge, invisible from the hall, too far from ground level to be noticed.

He was starting back down the corridor when a sound stopped him rigid. Voices, a routine hospital guard and somebody else. A familiar somebody else.

He raced back to the psych ward and into his sealed cube. The magnetic lock fitted reluctantly in place; the heat generated by the short had sprung its clamps. He got it shut as footsteps halted outside. The magnetic field of the lock was dead, but of course the visitors didn't know that. V-Stephens listened with amusement as the visitor carefully negated the supposed magnetic field and then pushed the lock open.

"Come in," V-Stephens said.

Doctor LeMarr entered, briefcase in one hand, cold-beam in the other. "Come along with me. I have everything arranged. Money, fake identification, passport, tickets and clearance. You'll go as a webfoot commercial agent. By the time Gannet finds out you'll be past the Military monitor and out of Earth jurisdiction."

V-Stephens was astounded. "But —"

"Hurry up!" LeMarr waved him into the corridor with his cold-beam. "As a staff member of the hospital I have authority over psych prisoners. Technically, you're listed as a mental patient. As far as I'm concerned you're no more crazy than the rest of them. If not less. That's why I'm here."

V-Stephens eyed him doubtfully. "You sure you know what you're doing?" He followed LeMarr down the corridor, past the blank-faced guard and into the elevator. "They'll destroy you as a traitor, if they catch you. That guard saw you — how are you going to keep this quiet?"

"I don't expect to keep this quiet. Gannet is here, you know. He and his staff have been working over the old man."

"Why are you telling me this?" The two of them strode down the descent ramp to the subsurface garage. An attendant rolled out LeMarr's car and they climbed into it, LeMarr behind the wheel. "You know why I was thrown in the psych-cube in the first place."

“Take this.” LeMarr tossed V-Stephens the cold-beam and steered up the tunnel to the surface, into the bright mid-day New York traffic. “You were going to contact Color-Ad and inform them Earth will absolutely lose the war.” He spun the car from the mainstream of traffic and onto a side lane, toward the interplan spacefield. “Tell them to stop working for compromise and strike hard — immediately. Full scale war. Right?”

“Right,” V-Stephens said. “After all, if we’re certain to win —”

“You’re not certain.”

V-Stephens raised a green eyebrow. “Oh? I thought Unger was a veteran of total defeat.”

“Gannet is going to change the course of the war. He’s found a critical point. As soon as he gets the exact information he’ll pressure the Directorate into an all-out attack on Venus and Mars. War can’t be avoided, not now.” LeMarr slammed his car to a halt at the edge of the interplan field. “If there has to be war at least nobody’s going to be taken by a sneak attack. You can tell your Colonial Organization and Administration our warfleet is on its way. Tell them to get ready. Tell them —”

LeMarr’s voice trailed off. Like an unwound toy he sagged against the seat, slid silently down, and lay quietly with his head against the steering wheel. His glasses dropped from his nose onto the floor and after a moment V-Stephens replaced them. “I’m sorry,” he said softly. “You meant well, but you sure fouled everything up.”

He briefly examined the surface of LeMarr’s skull. The impulse from the cold-beam had not penetrated into brain tissue; LeMarr would regain consciousness in a few hours with nothing worse than a severe headache. V-Stephens pocketed the cold-beam, grabbed up the briefcase, and pushed the limp body of LeMarr away from the wheel. A moment later he was turning on the motor and backing the car around.

As he sped back to the hospital he examined his watch. It wasn't too late. He leaned forward and dropped a quarter in the pay vidphone mounted on the dashboard. After a mechanical dialing process the Color-Ad receptionist flickered into view.

"This is V-Stephens," he said. "Something went wrong. I was taken out of the hospital building. I'm heading back there now. I can make it in time, I think."

"Is the vibrator-pack assembled?"

"Assembled, yes. But not with me. I had already fused it into polarization with the magnetic flux. It's ready to go — if I can get back there and at it."

"There's a hitch at this end," the green-skinned girl said. "Is this a closed circuit?"

"It's open," V-Stephens admitted. "But it's public and probably random. They couldn't very well have a bug on it." He checked the power meter on the guarantee seal fastened to the unit. "It shows no drain. Go ahead."

"The ship won't be able to pick you up in the city."

"Hell," V-Stephens said.

"You'll have to get out of New York on your own power; we can't help you there. Mobs destroyed our New York port facilities. You'll have to go by surface car to Denver. That's the nearest place the ship can land. That's our last protected spot on Earth."

V-Stephens groaned. "Just my luck. You know what'll happen if they catch me?"

The girl smiled faintly. “All webfoots look alike to Earthmen. They’ll be stringing us up indiscriminately. We’re in this together. Good luck; we’ll be waiting for you.”

V-Stephens angrily broke the circuit and slowed the car. He parked in a public parking lot on a dingy side street and got quickly out. He was at the edge of the green expanse of park. Beyond it, the hospital buildings rose. Gripping the briefcase tightly he ran toward the main entrance.

David Unger wiped his mouth on his sleeve, then lay back weakly against his chair. “I don’t know,” he repeated, his voice faint and dry. “I told you I don’t remember any more. It was so long ago.”

Gannet signaled, and the officers moved away from the old man. “It’s coming,” he said wearily. He mopped his perspiring forehead. “Slowly and surely. We should have what we want inside another half hour.”

One side of the therapy house had been turned into a Military table-map. Counters had been laid out across the surface to represent units of the webfoot and crow fleets. White luminous chips represented Earth ships lined up against them in a tight ring around the third planet.

“It’s someplace near here,” Lieutenant West said to Patterson. Red-eyed, stubble-chinned, hands shaking with fatigue and tension, he indicated a section of the map. “Unger remembers hearing officers talking about this convoy. The convoy took off from a supply base on Ganymede. It disappeared on some kind of deliberate random course.” His hands swept the area. “At the time, nobody on Earth paid any attention to it. Later, they realized what they’d lost. Some military expert charted the thing in retrospect and it was taped and passed around. Officers got together and analyzed the incident. Unger *thinks* the convoy route took it close to Europa. But maybe it was Callisto.”

“That’s not good enough,” Gannet snapped. “So far we don’t have any more route data than Earth tacticians had at that time. We need to add exact knowledge, material released after the event.”

David Unger fumbled with a glass of water. “Thanks,” he muttered gratefully, as one of the young officers handed it to him. “I sure wish I could help you fellows out better,” he said plaintively. “I’m trying to remember. But I don’t seem able to think clear, like I used to.” His wizened face twisted with futile concentration. “You know, it seems to me that convoy was stopped near Mars by some kind of meteor swarm.”

Gannet moved forward. “Go on.”

Unger appealed to him pathetically. “I want to help you all I can, mister. Most people go to write a book about a war, they just scan stuff from other books.” There was a pitiful gratitude on the eroded face. “I guess you’ll mention my name in your book, someplace.”

“Sure,” Gannet said expansively. “Your name’ll be on the first page. Maybe we could even get in a picture of you.”

“I know all about the war,” Unger muttered. “Give me time and I’ll have it straight. *Just give me time.* I’m trying as best I can.”

The old man was deteriorating rapidly. His wrinkled face was an unhealthy gray. Like drying putty, his flesh clung to his brittle, yellowed bones. His breath rattled in his throat. It was obvious to everyone present that David Unger was going to die — and soon.

“If he croaks before he remembers,” Gannet said softly to Lieutenant West, “I’ll —”

“What’s that?” Unger asked sharply. His one good eye was suddenly keen and wary. “I can’t hear so good.”

“Just fill in the missing elements,“Gannet said wearily. He jerked his head. “Get him over to the map where he can see the setup. Maybe that’ll help.”

The old man was yanked to his feet and propelled to the table. Technicians and brass hats closed in around him and the dim-eyed stumbling figure was lost from sight.

"He won't last long," Patterson said savagely. "If you don't let him rest his heart's going to give out."

"We must have the information," Gannet retorted. He eyed Patterson. "Where's the other doctor? LeMarr, I think he's called."

Patterson glanced briefly around. "I don't see him. He probably couldn't stand it."

"LeMarr never came," Gannet said, without emotion. "I wonder if we should have somebody round him up." He indicated Evelyn Cutter, who had just arrived, white-faced, her black eyes wide, breathing quickly. "She suggests —"

"It doesn't matter now," Evelyn said frigidly. She shot a quick, urgent glance at Patterson. "I want nothing to do with you and your war."

Gannet shrugged. "I'll send out a routine net, in any case. Just to be on the safe side." He moved off, leaving Evelyn and Patterson standing alone together.

"Listen to me," Evelyn said harshly, her lips hot and close to his ear. *"Unger's number has come up."*

"When did they notify you?" Patterson demanded.

"I was on my way here. I did what you said — I fixed it up with a clerk at Military."

"How long ago?"

“Just now.” Evelyn’s face trembled. “Vachel, *he’s here*”

It was a moment before Patterson understood. “You mean they sent him over here? To the hospital?”

“I told them to. I told them when he came to volunteer, when his number came to the top —”

Patterson grabbed her and hurried her from the therapy house, outside into the bright sunlight. He pushed her onto an ascent ramp and crowded in after her. “Where are they holding him?”

“In the public reception room. They told him it was a routine physical check. A minor test of some kind.” Evelyn was terrified. “What are we going to do? *Can* we do something?”

“Gannet thinks so.”

“Suppose we — stopped him? Maybe we could turn him aside?” She shook her head, dazed. “What would happen? What would the future be like if we stopped him here? You could keep him out of the Service — you’re a doctor. A little red check on his health card.” She began to laugh wildly. “I see them all the time. A little red check, and no more David Unger. Gannet never sees him, Gannet never knows Earth can’t win and then Earth will win, and V-Stephens doesn’t get locked up as a psychotic and that webfoot girl —”

Patterson’s open hand smashed across the woman’s face. “Shut up and snap out of it! We don’t have time for that!”

Evelyn shuddered; he caught hold of her and held on tight to her until finally she raised her face. A red welt was rising slowly on her cheek. “I’m sorry,” she managed to murmur. “Thanks. I’ll be all right.”

The lift had reached the main floor. The door slid back and Patterson led her out into the hall. “You haven’t seen him?”

“No. When they told me the number had come up and he was on his way” — Evelyn hurried breathlessly after Patterson — “I came as quickly as I could. Maybe it’s too late. Maybe he got tired of waiting and left. He’s a fifteen year old boy. He wants to get into the fight. Maybe he’s gone!”

Patterson halted a robot attendant. “Are you busy?”

“No sir,” the robot answered.

Patterson gave the robot David Unger’s i.d. number. “Get this man from the main reception room. Send him out here and then close off this hall. Seal it at both ends so nobody can enter or leave.”

The robot clicked uncertainly. “Will there be further orders? This syndrome doesn’t complete a —”

“I’ll instruct you later. Make sure nobody comes out with him. I want to meet him here alone.”

The robot scanned the number and then disappeared into the reception room.

Patterson gripped Evelyn’s arm. “Scared?”

“I’m terrified.”

“I’ll handle it. You just stand there.” He passed her his cigarettes. “Light one for both of us.”

“Three, maybe. One for Unger.”

Patterson grinned. “He’s too young, remember? He’s not old enough to smoke.”

The robot returned. With it was a blond boy, plump and blue-eyed, his face wrinkled with perplexity. “You wanted me, Doc?” He came uncertainly up to Patterson. “Is there something wrong with me? They told me to come here, but they didn’t say what for.” His anxiety increased with a tidal rush. “There’s nothing to keep me out of the Service is there?”

Patterson grabbed the boy’s newly stamped i.d. card, glanced at it, and then passed it to Evelyn. She accepted it with paralyzed fingers, her eyes on the blond youth.

He was not David Unger.

“What’s your name?” Patterson demanded.

The boy stammered out his name shyly. “Bert Robinson. Doesn’t it say there on my card?”

Patterson turned to Evelyn. “It’s the right number. But this isn’t Unger. Something’s happened.”

“Say, Doc,” Robinson asked plaintively, “is there something going to keep me out of the Service or not? Give me the word.”

Patterson signaled the robot. “Open up the hall. It’s all over with. You can go back to what you were doing.”

“I don’t understand,” Evelyn murmured. “It doesn’t make sense.”

“You’re all right,” Patterson said to the youth. “You can report for induction.”

The boy’s face sagged with relief. “Thanks a lot, Doc.” He edged toward the descent ramp. “I sure appreciate it. I’m dying to get a crack at those webfoots.”

“Now what?” Evelyn said tightly, when the youth’s broad back had disappeared. “Where do we go from here?”

Patterson shook himself alive. “We’ll get the Census Department to make their check. *We’ve got to locate Unger.”*

The transmission room was a humming blur of vid and aud reports. Patterson elbowed his way to an open circuit and placed the call.

“That information will take a short time, sir,” the girl at Census told him. “Will you wait, or shall we return your call?”

Patterson grabbed up an h-loop and clipped it around his neck. “As soon as you have any information on Unger let me know. Break into this loop immediately.”

“Yes, sir,” the girl said dutifully, and broke the circuit.

Patterson headed out of the room and down the corridor. Evelyn hurried after him. “Where are we going?” she asked.

“To the therapy house. I want to talk to the old man. I want to ask him some things.”

“Gannet’s doing that,” Evelyn gasped, as they descended to the ground level. “Why do you —”

“I want to ask him about the present, not the future.” They emerged in the blinding afternoon sunlight. “I want to ask him about things going on right now.”

Evelyn stopped him. “Can’t you explain it to me?”

“I have a theory,” Patterson pushed urgently past her. “Come on, before it’s too late.”

They entered the therapy house. Technicians and officers were standing around the huge map table, examining the counters and indicator lines. “Where’s Unger?” Patterson demanded.

“He’s gone,” one of the officers answered. “Gannet gave up for today.”

“Gone where?” Patterson began to swear savagely. “What happened?”

“Gannet and West took him back to the main building. He was too worn out to continue. We almost had it. Gannet’s ready to burst a blood vessel, but we’ll have to wait.”

Patterson grabbed Evelyn Cutter. “I want you to set off a general emergency alarm. Have the building surrounded. And *hurry!”*

Evelyn gaped at him. “But —”

Patterson ignored her and raced out of the therapy house, toward the main hospital building. Ahead of him were three slowly moving figures. Lieutenant West and Gannet walked on each side of the old man, supporting him as he crept forward.

“Get away!” Patterson shouted at them.

Gannet turned. “What’s going on?”

“Get him away!” Patterson dived for the old man — but it was too late.

The burst of energy seared past him; an ignited circle of blinding white flame lapped everywhere. The hunched-over figure of the old man wavered, then charred. The aluminum cane fused and ran down in a molten mass.

What had been the old man began to smoke. The body cracked open and shriveled. Then very slowly, the dried, dehydrated fragment of ash crumpled in a weightless heap. Gradually the circle of energy faded out.

Gannet kicked aimlessly at it, his heavy face numb with shock and disbelief. “He’s dead. And we didn’t get it.”

Lieutenant West stared at the still-smoking ash. His lips twisted into words. “We’ll never find out. We can’t change it. We can’t win.” Suddenly his fingers grabbed at his coat. He tore the insignia from it and hurled the square of cloth savagely away. “I’ll be damned if I’m going to give up my life so you can corner the system. I’m not getting into that death trap. Count me out!”

The wail of the general emergency alarm dinned from the hospital building. Scampering figures raced toward Gannet, soldiers and hospital guards scurrying in confusion. Patterson paid no attention to them; his eyes were on the window directly above.

Someone was standing there. A man, his hands deftly at work removing an object that flashed in the afternoon sun. The man was V-Stephens. He got the object of metal and plastic loose and disappeared with it, away from the window.

Evelyn hurried up beside Patterson. “What —” She saw the remains and screamed. “Oh, God. Who did it? *Who?*”

“V-Stephens.”

“LeMarr must have let him out. I knew it would happen.” Tears filled her eyes and her voice rose in shrill hysteria. “I told you he’d do it! I

warned you!”

Gannet appealed childishly to Patterson. “What are we going to do? He’s been murdered.” Rage suddenly swept away the big man’s fear. “I’ll kill every webfoot on the planet. I’ll burn down their homes and string them up. I’ll —” He broke off raggedly. “But it’s too late, isn’t it? There’s nothing we can do. We’ve lost. We’re beaten, and the war hasn’t even begun.”

“That’s right,” Patterson said. “It’s too late. Your chance is gone.”

“If we could have got him to talk —” Gannet snarled helplessly.

“You couldn’t. It wasn’t possible.”

Gannet blinked. “Why not?” Some of his innate animal cunning filtered back. “Why do you say that?”

Around Patterson’s neck his h-loop buzzed loudly. “Doctor Patterson,” the monitor’s voice came, “there is a rush call for you from Census.”

“Put it through,” Patterson said.

The voice of the Census clerk came tinnily in his ears. “Doctor Patterson, I have the information you requested.”

“What is it?” Patterson demanded. But he already knew the answer.

“We have cross-checked our results to be certain. There is no person such as you described. There is no individual at this time or in our past records named David L. Unger with the identifying characteristics you outlined. The brain, teeth, and fingerprints do not refer to anything extant in our files. Do you wish us to —”

“No,” Patterson said. “That answers my question. Let it go.” He cut off the h-loop switch.

Gannet was listening dully. “This is completely over my head, Patterson. Explain it to me.”

Patterson ignored him. He squatted down and poked at the ash that had been David Unger. After a moment he snapped the h-loop on again. “I want this taken upstairs to the analytical labs,” he ordered quietly. “Get a team out here at once.” He got slowly to his feet and added even more softly, “Then I’m going to find V-Stephens — if I can.”

“He’s undoubtedly on his way to Venus by now,” Evelyn Cutter said bitterly. “Well, that’s that. There’s nothing we can do about it.”

“We’re going to have war,” Gannet admitted. He came slowly back to reality. With a violent effort he focused on the people around him. He smoothed down his mane of white hair and adjusted his coat. A semblance of dignity was restored to his once-impressive frame. “We might as well meet it like men. There’s no use trying to escape it.”

Patterson moved aside as a group of hospital robots approached the charred remains and began gingerly to collect them in a single heap. “Make a complete analysis,” he said to the technician in charge of the work-detail. “Break down the basic cell-units, especially the neurological apparatus. Report what you find to me as soon as you possibly can.”

It took just about an hour.

“Look for yourself,” the lab technician said. “Here, take hold of some of the material. It doesn’t even *feel* right.”

Patterson accepted a sample of dry, brittle organic matter. It might have been the smoked skin of some sea creature. It broke apart easily in his

hands; as he put it down among the test equipment it crumbled into powdery fragments. “I see,” he said slowly.

“It’s good, considering. But it’s weak. Probably it wouldn’t have stood up another couple of days. It was deteriorating rapidly; sun, air, everything was breaking it down. There was no innate repair-system involved. Our cells are constantly reprocessed, cleaned and maintained. This thing was set up and then pushed into motion. Obviously, somebody’s a long way ahead of us in biosynthetics. This is a masterpiece.”

“Yes, it’s a good job,” Patterson admitted. He took another sample of what had been the body of David Unger and thoughtfully broke it into small dry pieces. “It fooled us completely.”

“You knew, didn’t you?”

“Not at first.”

“As you can see we’re reconstructing the whole system, getting the ash back into one piece. Parts are missing, of course, but we can get the general outlines. I’d like to meet the manufacturers of this thing. This really worked. This was no machine.”

Patterson located the charred ash that had been reconstructed into the android’s face. Withered, blackened paper-thin flesh. The dead eye gazed out lusterless and blind. Census had been right. There was never a David Unger. Such a person had never lived on Earth or anywhere else. What they had called “David Unger” was a man-made synthetic.

“We were really taken in,” Patterson admitted. “How many people know, besides the two of us?”

“Nobody else.” The lab technician indicated his squad of work-robots. “I’m the only human on this detail.”

“Can you keep it quiet?”

“Sure. You’re my boss, you know.”

“Thanks,” Patterson said. “But if you want, this information would get you another boss any time.”

“Gannet?” The lab technician laughed. “I don’t think I’d like to work for him.”

“He’d pay you pretty well.”

“True,” said the lab technician. “But one of these days I’d be in the front lines. I like it better here in the hospital.”

Patterson started toward the door. “If anybody asks, tell them there wasn’t enough left to analyze. Can you dispose of these remains?”

“I’d hate to, but I guess I can.” The technician eyed him curiously. “You have any idea who put this thing together? I’d like to shake hands with them.”

“I’m interested in only one thing right now,” Patterson said obliquely. “V-Stephens has to be found.”

LeMarr blinked, as dull late-afternoon sunlight filtered into his brain. He pulled himself upright — and banged his head sharply on the dashboard of the car. Pain swirled around him and for a time he sank back down into agonized darkness. Then slowly, gradually, he emerged. And peered around him.

His car was parked in the rear of a small, dilapidated public lot. It was about five-thirty. Traffic swarmed noisily along the narrow street onto which the lot fed. LeMarr reached up and gingerly explored the side of his skull. There was a numb spot the size of a silver dollar, an area totally

without sensation. The spot radiated a chill breath, the utter absence of heat, as if somehow he had bumped against a nexus of outer space.

He was still trying to collect himself and recollect the events that had preceded his period of unconsciousness, when the swift-moving form of Doctor V-Stephens appeared.

V-Stephens ran lithely between the parked surface cars, one hand in his coat pocket, eyes alert and wary. There was something strange about him, a difference that LeMarr in his befuddled state couldn't pin down. V-Stephens had almost reached the car before he realized what it was — and at the same time was lashed by the full surge of memory. He sank down and lay against the door, as limp and inert as possible. In spite of himself he started slightly, as V-Stephens yanked the door open and slid behind the wheel.

V-Stephens was no longer green.

The Venusian slammed the door, jabbed the car key in the lock, and started up the motor. He lit a cigarette, examined his pair of heavy gloves, glanced briefly at LeMarr, and pulled out of the lot into the early-evening traffic. For a moment he drove with one gloved hand on the wheel, the other still inside his coat. Then, as he gained full speed, he slid his cold-beam out, gripped it briefly, and dropped it on the seat beside him.

LeMarr pounced on it. From the corner of his eye, V-Stephens saw the limp body swing into life. He slammed on the emergency brake and forgot the wheel; the two of them struggled silently, furiously. The car shrieked to a halt and immediately became the center of an angry mass of honking car-horns. The two men fought with desperate intensity, neither of them breathing, locked almost immobile as momentarily all forces balanced. Then LeMarr yanked away, the cold-beam aimed at V-Stephens' colorless face.

"What happened?" he croaked hoarsely. "I'm missing five hours. *What did you do?"*

V-Stephens said nothing. He released the brake and began driving slowly with the swirl of traffic. Gray cigarette smoke dribbled from between his lips; his eyes were half-closed, filmed over and opaque.

“You’re an Earthman,” LeMarr said, wonderingly. “You’re not a webfoot after all.”

“I’m a Venusian,” V-Stephens answered indifferently. He showed his webbed fingers, then replaced his heavy driving gloves.

“But how —”

“You think we can’t pass over the color line when we want to?” V-Stephens shrugged. “Dyes, chemical hormones, a few minor surgical operations. A half hour in the men’s room with a hypodermic and salve… This is no planet for a man with green skin.”

Across the street a hasty barricade had been erected. A group of sullen-faced men stood around with guns and crude hand-clubs, some of them Wearing gray Home Guard caps. They were flagging down cars one by one and searching them. A beefy-faced man waved V-Stephens to a halt. He strolled over and gestured for the window to be rolled down.

“What’s going on?” LeMarr demanded nervously.

“Looking for webfoots,” the man growled, a thick odor of garlic and perspiration steaming from his heavy canvas shirt. He darted quick, suspicious glances into the car. “Seen any around?”

“No,” V-Stephens said.

The man ripped open the luggage compartment and peered in. “We caught one a couple minutes ago.” He jerked his thick thumb. “See him up there?”

The Venusian had been strung up to a street lamp. His green body dangled and swayed with the early-evening wind. His face was a mottled, ugly mass of pain. A crowd of people stood around the pole, grim, mean-looking. Waiting

“There’ll be more,” the man said, as he slammed the luggage compartment. “Plenty more.”

“What happened?” LeMarr managed to ask. He was nauseated and horrified; his voice came out almost inaudible. “Why all this?”

“A webfoot killed a man. An *Earth*man.” The man pulled back and slapped the car. “Okay — you can go.”

V-Stephens moved the car forward. Some of the loitering people had whole uniforms, combinations of the Home Guard gray and Terran blue. Boots, heavy belt-buckles, caps, pistols, and armbands. The armbands read D.C. in bold black letters against a red background.

“What’s that?” LeMarr asked faintly.

“Defense Committee,” V-Stephens answered. “Gannet’s front outfit. To defend Earth against the webfoots and crows.”

“But —” LeMarr gestured helplessly. “Is Earth being attacked?”

“Not that I know of.”

“Turn the car around. Head back to the hospital.”

V-Stephens hesitated, then did as he was told. In a moment the car was speeding back toward the center of New York. “What’s this for?” V-Stephens asked. “Why do you want to go back?”

LeMarr didn’t hear him; he was gazing with fixed horror at the people along the street. Men and women prowling like animals, looking for something to kill. “They’ve gone crazy,” LeMarr muttered. “They’re beasts.”

“No,” V-Stephens said. “This’ll die down, soon. When the Committee gets its financial support jerked out from under it. It’s still going full blast, but pretty soon the gears will change around and the big engine will start grinding in reverse.”

“Why?”

“Because Gannet doesn’t want war, now. It takes a while for the new line to trickle down. Gannet will probably finance a movement called P.C. Peace Committee.”

The hospital was surrounded by a wall of tanks and trucks and heavy mobile guns. V-Stephens slowed the car to a halt and stubbed out his cigarette. No cars were being passed. Soldiers moved among the tanks with gleaming heavy-duty weapons that were still shiny with packing grease.

“Well?” V-Stephens said. “What now? You have the gun. It’s your hot potato.”

LeMarr dropped a coin in the vidphone mounted on the dashboard. He gave the hospital number, and when the monitor appeared, asked hoarsely for Vachel Patterson.

“Where are you?” Patterson demanded. He saw the cold-beam in LeMarr’s hand, and then his eyes fastened on V-Stephens. “I see you got him.”

“Yes,” LeMarr agreed, “but I don’t understand what’s happening.” He appealed helplessly to Patterson’s miniature vidimage. “What’ll I do? What is all this?”

“Give me your location,” Patterson said tensely.

LeMarr did so. “You want me to bring him to the hospital? Maybe I should —”

“Just hold onto that cold-beam. I’ll be right there.” Patterson broke the connection and the screen died.

LeMarr shook his head in bewilderment. “I was trying to get you away,” he said to V-Stephens. “Then you cold-beamed me. *Why?”* Suddenly LeMarr shuddered violently. Full understanding came to him. “You killed David Unger!”

“That’s right,” V-Stephens answered.

The cold beam trembled in LeMarr’s hand. “Maybe I ought to kill you right now. Maybe I ought to roll down the window and yell to those madmen to come and get you. I don’t know.”

“Do whatever you think best,” V-Stephens said.

LeMarr was still trying to decide, when Patterson appeared beside the car. He rapped on the window and LeMarr unlocked the door. Patterson climbed quickly in, and slammed the door after him.

“Start up the car,” he said to V-Stephens. “Keep moving, away from downtown.”

V-Stephens glanced briefly at him, and then slowly started up the motor. “You might as well do it here,” he said to Patterson. “Nobody’ll interfere.”

“I want to get out of the city,” Patterson answered. He added in explanation, “My lab staff analyzed the remains of David Unger. They were

able to reconstruct most of the synthetic."

V-Stephens' face registered a surge of frantic emotion. "Oh?"

Patterson reached out his hand. "Shake," he said grimly.

"Why?" V-Stephens asked, puzzled.

"Somebody told me to do this. Somebody who agrees you Venusians did one hell of a good job when you made that android."

The car purred along the highway, through the evening gloom. "Denver is the last place left," V-Stephens explained to the two Earthmen. "There're too many of us, there. Color-Ad says a few Committee men started shelling our offices, but the Directorate put a sudden stop to it. Gannet's pressure, probably."

"I want to hear more," Patterson said. "Not about Gannet; I know where he stands. I want to know what you people are up to."

"Color-Ad engineered the synthetic," V-Stephens admitted. "We don't know any more about the future than you do — which is absolutely nothing. There never was a David Unger. We forged the i.d. papers, built up a whole false personality, history of a non-existent war — everything."

"Why?" LeMarr demanded.

"To scare Gannet into calling off the dogs. To terrify him into letting Venus and Mars become independent. To keep him from fanning up a war to preserve his economic strangle-hold. The fake history we constructed in Unger's mind has Gannet's nine-world empire broken and destroyed. Gannet's a realist. He'd take a risk when he had odds — but our history put the odds one hundred percent against him."

"So Gannet pulls out," Patterson said slowly. "And you?"

“We were always out,” V-Stephens said quietly. “We were never in this war game. All we want is our freedom and independence. I don’t know what the war would really be like, but I can guess. Not very pleasant. Not worth it for either of us. And as things were going, war was in the cards.”

“I want to get a few things straight,” Patterson said. “You’re a Color-Ad agent?”

“Right.”

“And V-Rafia?”

“She was also Color-Ad. Actually, all Venusians and Martians are Color-Ad agents as soon as they hit Earth. We wanted to get V-Rafia into the hospital to help me out. There was a chance I’d be prevented from destroying the synthetic at the proper time. If I hadn’t been able to do it, V-Rafia would have. But Gannet killed her.”

“Why didn’t you simply cold-beam Unger?”

“For one thing we wanted the synthetic body completely destroyed. That isn’t possible, of course. Reduced to ash was the next best thing. Broken down small enough so a cursory examination wouldn’t show anything.” He glanced up at Patterson. “Why’d you order such a radical examination?”

“Unger’s i.d. number had come up. And Unger didn’t appear to claim it.”

“Oh,” V-Stephens said uneasily. “That’s bad. We had no way to tell when it would appear. We tried to pick a number due in a few months — but enlistment rose sharply the last couple of weeks.”

“Suppose you hadn’t been able to destroy Unger?”

“We had the demolition machinery phased in such a way that the synthetic didn’t have a chance. It was tuned to his body; all I had to do was activate it with Unger in the general area. If I had been killed, or I hadn’t been able to set off the mechanism, the synthetic would have died naturally before Gannet got the information he wanted. Preferably, I was to destroy it in plain view of Gannet and his staff. It was important they think we knew about the war. The psychological shock-value of seeing Unger murdered outweighs the risk of my capture.”

“What happens next?” Patterson asked presently.

“I’m supposed to join with Color-Ad. Originally, I was to grab a ship at the New York office, but Gannet’s mobs took care of that. Of course, this is assuming you won’t stop me.”

LeMarr had begun to sweat. “Suppose Gannet finds out he was tricked? If he discovers there never was a David Unger —”

“We’re patching that up,” V-Stephens said. “By the time Gannet checks, there will be a David Unger. Meanwhile —” He shrugged. “It’s up to you two. You’ve got the gun.”

“Let him go,” LeMarr said fervently.

“That’s not very patriotic,” Patterson pointed out. “We’re helping the webfoots put over something. Maybe we ought to call in one of those Committee men.”

“The devil with them,” LeMarr grated. “I wouldn’t turn anybody over to those lynch-happy lunatics. Even a —”

“Even a webfoot?” V-Stephens asked.

Patterson was gazing up at the black, star-pocked sky. “What’s finally going to happen?” he asked V-Stephens. “You think this stuff will end?”

“Sure,” V-Stephens said promptly. “One of these days we’ll be moving out into the stars. Into other systems. We’ll bump into other races — and I mean *real* other races. Nonhuman in the true sense of the word. Then people will see we’re all of the same stem. It’ll be obvious, when we’ve got something to compare ourselves to.”

“Okay,” Patterson said. He took the cold-beam and handed it to V-Stephens. “That was all that worried me. I’d hate to think this stuff might keep on going.”

“It won’t,” V-Stephens answered quietly. “Some of those nonhuman races ought to be pretty hideous. After a look at them, Earthmen will be *glad* to have their daughters marry men with green skin.” He grinned briefly. “Some of the nonhuman races may not have any skin at all…”

The Chromium Fence

Earth tilted toward six o’clock, the work-day almost over. Commute discs rose in dense swarms and billowed away from the industrial zone toward the surrounding residential rings. Like nocturnal moths, the thick clouds of discs darkened the evening sky. Silent, weightless, they whisked their passengers toward home and waiting families, hot meals and bed.

Don Walsh was the third man on his disc; he completed the load. As he dropped the coin in the slot the carpet rose impatiently. Walsh settled gratefully against the invisible safety-rail and unrolled the evening newspaper. Across from him the other two commuters were doing the same.

HORNEY AMENDMENT STIRS UP FIGHT

Walsh reflected on the significance of the headline. He lowered the paper from the steady windcurrents and perused the next column.

HUGE TURNOUT EXPECTED MONDAY

ENTIRE PLANET TO GO TO POLLS

On the back of the single sheet was the day’s scandal.

WIFE MURDERS HUSBAND OVER POLITICAL TIFF

And an item that made strange chills up and down his spine. He had seen it crop up repeatedly, but it always made him feel uncomfortable.

PURIST MOB LYNCHES NATURALIST IN BOSTON

WINDOWS SMASHED - GREAT DAMAGE DONE

And in the next column:

NATURALIST MOB LYNCHES PURIST IN CHICAGO

BUILDINGS BURNED - GREAT DAMAGE DONE

Across from Walsh, one of his companions was beginning to mumble aloud. He was a big heavyset man, middle-aged, with red hair and beer-swollen features. Suddenly he waded up his newspaper and hurled it from the disc. “They’ll never pass it!” he shouted. “They won’t get away with it!”

Walsh buried his nose in his paper and desperately ignored the man. It was happening again, the thing he dreaded every hour of the day. A political argument. The other commuter had lowered his newspaper; briefly, he eyed the red-haired man and then continued reading.

The red-haired man addressed Walsh. “You signed the Butte Petition?” He yanked a mentalfoil tablet from his pocket and pushed it in Walsh’s face. “Don’t be afraid to put down your name for liberty.”

Walsh clutched his newspaper and peered frantically over the side of the disc. The Detroit residential units were spinning by; he was almost home. “Sorry,” he muttered. “Thanks, no thanks.”

“Leave him alone,” the other commuter said to the red-haired man. “Can’t you see he doesn’t want to sign it?”

“Mind your own business.” The red-haired man moved close to Walsh, the tablet extended belligerently. “Look, friend. You know what it’ll mean to you and yours if this thing gets passed? You think you’ll be safe? Wake up, friend. When the Horney Amendment comes in, freedom and liberty go out.”

The other commuter quietly put his newspaper away. He was slim, well-dressed, a gray-haired cosmopolitan. He removed his glasses and said, “You smell like a Naturalist, to me.”

The red-haired man studied his opponent. He noticed the wide plutonium ring on the slender man’s hand; a jaw-breaking band of heavy metal. “What are you?” the red-haired man muttered, “a sissy-kissing

Purist? Agh.” He made a disgusting spitting motion and returned to Walsh. “Look, friend, you know what these Purists are after. They want to make us degenerates. They’ll turn us into a race of women. If God made the universe the way it is, it’s good enough for me. They’re going against God when they go against nature. This planet was built up by red-blooded *men,* who were proud of their bodies, proud of the way they looked and smelled.” He tapped his own heavy chest. “By God, I’m proud of the way *I* smell!”

Walsh stalled desperately. “I —” he muttered. “No, I can’t sign it.”

“You already signed?”

“No.”

Suspicion settled over the red-haired man’s beefy features. “You mean you’re *for* the Horney Amendment?” His thick voice rose wrathfully. “You want to see an end to the natural order of —”

“This is where I get off,” Walsh interrupted; he hurriedly yanked the stop-cord of the disc. It swept down toward the magnetic grapple at the end of his unit-section, a row of white squares set across the green and brown hillside.

“Wait a minute, friend.” The red-haired man reached ominously for Walsh’s sleeve, as the disc slid to a halt on the flat surface of the grapple. Surface cars were parked in rows; wives waiting to cart their husbands home.

“I don’t like your attitude. You afraid to stand up and be counted? You ashamed to be a part of your race? By God, if you’re not man enough to —”

The lean, gray-haired man smashed him with his plutonium ring, and the grip on Walsh’s sleeve loosened. The petition clattered to the ground and the two of them fought furiously, silently.

Walsh pushed aside the safety-rail and jumped from the disc, down the three steps of the grapple and onto the ashes and cinders of the parking lot. In the gloom of early evening he could make out his wife's car; Betty sat watching the dashboard tv, oblivious of him and the silent struggle between the red-haired Naturalist and the gray-haired Purist.

"Beast," the gray-haired man gasped, as he straightened up. "Stinking animal!"

The red-haired man lay semi-conscious against the safety-rail. "God damn — lily!" he grunted.

The gray-haired man pressed the release, and the disc rose above Walsh and on its way. Walsh waved gratefully. "Thanks," he called up. "I appreciate that."

"Not at all," the gray-haired man answered, cheerfully examining a broken tooth. His voice dwindled, as the disc gained altitude. "Always glad to help out a fellow…" The final words came drifting to Walsh's ears. "… A fellow Purist."

"I'm not!" Walsh shouted futilely. "I'm not a Purist and I'm not a Naturalist! You hear me?"

Nobody heard him.

"I'm not," Walsh repeated monotonously, as he sat at the dinner table spooning up creamed corn, potatoes, and rib steak. "I'm not a Purist and I'm not a Naturalist. Why do I have to be one or the other? Isn't there any place for a man who has his *own* opinion?"

"Eat your food, dear," Betty murmured.

Through the thin walls of the bright little dining room came the echoing clink of other families eating, other conversations in progress. The tinny blare of tv sets. The purr of stoves and freezers and air conditioners and wall-heaters. Across from Walsh his brother-in-law Carl was gulping down a second plateful of steaming food. Beside him, Walsh's fifteen year old son Jimmy was scanning a paper-bound edition of *Finnegans Wake* he had bought in the downramp store that supplied the self-contained housing unit.

"Don't read at the table," Walsh said angrily to his son.

Jimmy glanced up. "Don't kid me. I know the unit rules; that one sure as hell isn't listed. And anyhow, I have to get this read before I leave."

"Where are you going tonight, dear?" Betty asked.

"Official party business," Jimmy answered obliquely. "I can't tell you any more than that."

Walsh concentrated on his food and tried to brake the tirade of thoughts screaming through his mind. "On the way home from work," he said, "there was a fight."

Jimmy was interested. "Who won?"

"The Purist."

A glow of pride slowly covered the boy's face; he was a sergeant in the Purist Youth League. "Dad, you ought to get moving. Sign up now and you'll be eligible to vote next Monday."

"I'm going to vote."

"Not unless you're a member of one of the two parties."

It was true. Walsh gazed unhappily past his son, into the days that lay ahead. He saw himself involved in endless wretched situations like the one today; sometimes it would be Naturalists who attacked him, and other times (like last week) it would be enraged Purists.

"You know," his brother-in-law said, "you're helping the Purists by just sitting around here doing nothing." He belched contentedly and pushed his empty plate away. "You're what *we* class as unconsciously pro-Purist." He glared at Jimmy. "You little squirt! If you were legal age I'd take you out and whale the tar out of you."

"Please," Betty sighed. "No quarreling about politics at the table. Let's have peace and quiet, for a change. I'll certainly be glad when the election is over."

Carl and Jimmy glared at each other and continued eating warily. "You should eat in the kitchen —" Jimmy said to him. "Under the stove. That's where you belong. Look at you — there's sweat all over you." A nasty sneer interrupted his eating. "When we get the Amendment passed, you better get rid of that, if you don't want to get hauled off to jail."

Carl flushed. "You creeps won't get it passed." But his gruff voice lacked conviction. The Naturalists were scared; Purists had control of the Federal Council. If the election moved in their favor it was really possible the legislation to compel forced observation of the five-point Purist code might get on the books. "Nobody is going to remove my sweat glands," Carl muttered. "Nobody is going to make me submit to breath-control and teeth-whitening and hair-restorer. It's part of life to get dirty and bald and fat and old."

"Is it true?" Betty asked her husband. "Are you really unconsciously pro-Purist?"

Don Walsh savagely speared a remnant of rib steak. "Because I don't join either party I'm called unconsciously pro-Purist and unconsciously pro-

Naturalist. I claim they balance. If I'm everybody's enemy than I'm nobody's enemy." He added, "Or friend."

"You Naturalists have nothing to offer the future," Jimmy said to Carl. "What can you give the youth of the planet — like me? Caves and raw meat and a bestial existence. You're anti-civilization."

"Slogans," Carl retorted.

"You want to carry us back to a primitive existence, away from social integration." Jimmy waved an excited skinny finger in his uncle's face. "You're thalamically oriented!"

"I'll break your head," Carl snarled, half out of his chair. "You Purist squirts have no respect for your elders."

Jimmy giggled shrilly. "I'd like to see you try. It's five years in prison for striking a minor. Go ahead — hit me."

Don Walsh got heavily to his feet and left the dining room.

"Where are you going?" Betty called peevishly after him. "You're not through eating."

"The future belongs to youth," Jimmy was informing Carl. "And the youth of the planet is firmly Purist. You don't have a chance; the Purist revolution is coming."

Don Walsh left the apartment and wandered down the common corridor toward the ramp. Closed doors extended in rows on both sides of him. Noise and light and activity radiated around him, the close presence of families and domestic interaction. He pushed past a boy and girl making love in the dark shadows and reached the ramp. For a moment he halted,

then abruptly he moved forward and descended to the lowest level of the unit.

The level was deserted and cool and slightly moist. Above him the sounds of people had faded to dull echoes against the concrete ceiling. Conscious of his sudden plunge into isolation and silence he advanced thoughtfully between the dark grocery and dry goods stores, past the beauty shop and the liquor store, past the laundry and medical supply store, past the dentist and physical doctor, to the anteroom of the unit analyst.

He could see the analyst within the inner chamber. It sat immobile and silent, in the dark shadows of evening. Nobody was consulting it; the analyst was turned off. Walsh hesitated, then crossed the check-frame of the anteroom and knocked on the transparent inner door. The presence of his body closed relays and switches; abruptly the lights of the inner office winked on and the analyst itself sat up, smiled and half-rose to its feet.

“Don,” it called heartily. “Come on in and sit down.”

He entered and wearily seated himself. “I thought maybe I could talk to you, Charley,” he said.

“Sure, Don.” The robot leaned forward to see the clock on its wide mahogany desk. “But, isn’t it dinner time?”

“Yes,” Walsh admitted. “I’m not hungry. Charley, you know what we were talking about last time… you remember what I was saying. You remember what’s been bothering me.”

“Sure, Don.” The robot settled back in its swivel chair, rested its almost-convincing elbows on the desk, and regarded its patient kindly. “How’s it been going, the last couple of days?”

“Not so good. Charley, I’ve go to do something. You can help me; you’re not biased.” He appealed to the quasi-human face of metal and

plastic. “You can see this undistorted, Charley. *How can I join one of the parties?* All their slogans and propaganda, it seems so damn — silly. How the hell can I get excited about clean teeth and underarm odor? People kill each other over these trifles… it doesn’t make sense. There’s going to be suicidal civil war, if that Amendment passes, and I’m supposed to join one side or the other.”

Charley nodded. “I have the picture, Don.”

“Am I supposed to go out and knock some fellow over the head because he does or doesn’t smell? Some man I never saw before? I won’t do it. I refuse. Why can’t they let me alone? Why can’t I have my own opinions? Why do I have to get in on this — insanity?”

The analyst smiled tolerantly. “That’s a little harsh, Don. You’re out of phase with your society, you know. So the cultural climate and mores seem a trifle unconvincing to you. But this is your society; you have to live in it. You can’t withdraw.”

Walsh forced his hands to relax. “Here’s what I think. Any man who wants to smell should be allowed to smell. Any man who doesn’t want to smell should go and get his glands removed. What’s the matter with that?”

“Don, you’re avoiding the issue.” The robot’s voice was calm, dispassionate. “What you’re saying is that neither side is right. And that’s foolish, isn’t it? One side must be right.”

“Why?”

“Because the two sides exhaust the practical possibilities. Your position isn’t really a position… it’s a sort of description. You see, Don, you have a psychological inability to come to grips with an issue. You don’t want to commit yourself for fear you’ll lose your freedom and individuality. You’re sort of an intellectual virgin; you want to stay pure.”

Walsh reflected. “I want,” he said, “to keep my integrity.”

“You’re not an isolated individual, Don. You’re a part of society… ideas don’t exist in a vacuum.”

“I have a right to hold my own ideas.”

“No, Don,” the robot answered gently. “They’re not your ideas; you didn’t create them. You can’t turn them on and off when you feel like it. They operate through you… they’re conditionings deposited by your environment. What you believe is a reflection of certain social forces and pressures. In your case the two mutually-exclusive social trends have produced a sort of stalemate. You’re at war with yourself… you can’t decide which side to join because elements of both exist in you.” The robot nodded wisely. “But you’ve got to make a decision. You’ve got to resolve this conflict and act. You can’t remain a spectator… you’ve got to be a participant. Nobody can be a spectator to life… and this is life.”

“You mean there’s no other world but this business about sweat and teeth land hair?”

“Logically, there are other societies. But this is the one you were born into. This is your society… the only one you will ever have. You either live in it, or you don’t live.”

Walsh got to his feet. “In other words, *I* have to make the adjustment. Something has to give, and it’s got to be me.”

“Afraid so, Don. It would be silly to expect everybody else to adjust to you, I wouldn’t it? Three and a half billion people would have to change just to please Don Walsh. You see, Don, you’re not quite out of your infantile-selfish stage. You haven’t quite got to the point of facing reality.” The robot smiled. “But you will.”

Walsh started moodily from the office. “I’ll think it over.”

“It’s for your own good, Don.”

At the door, Walsh turned to say something more. But the robot had clicked off; it was fading into darkness and silence, elbows still resting on the desk. The dimming overhead lights caught something he hadn’t noticed before. The powercord that was the robot’s umbilicus had a white-plastic tag wired to it. In the semi-gloom he could make out the printed words.

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The robot, like everything else in the multi-family unit, was supplied by the controlling institutions of society. The analyst was a creature of the state, a bureaucrat with a desk and job. Its function was to equate people like Don Walsh with the world as it was.

But if he didn’t listen to the unit analyst, who was he supposed to listen to? Where else could he go?

Three days later the election took place. The glaring headline told him nothing he didn’t already know; his office had buzzed with the news all day. He put the paper away in his coat pocket and didn’t examine it until he got home.

PURISTS WIN BY LANDSLIDE

HORNEY AMENDMENT CERTAIN TO PASS

Walsh lay back wearily in his chair. In the kitchen Betty was briskly preparing dinner. The pleasant clink of dishes and the warm odor of cooking food drifted through the bright little apartment.

“The Purists won,” Walsh said, when Betty appeared with an armload of I silver and cups. “It’s all over.”

“Jimmy will be happy,” Betty answered vaguely. “I wonder if Carl will be home in time for dinner.” She calculated silently. “Maybe I ought to run downramp for some more coffee.”

“Don’t you understand?” Walsh demanded. “It’s happened! The Purists have complete power!”

“I understand,” Betty answered peevishly. “You don’t have to shout. Did you sign that petition thing? That Butte Petition the Naturalists have been circulating?”

“No.”

“Thank God. I didn’t think so; you never sign anything anybody brings around.” She lingered at the kitchen door. “I hope Carl has sense enough to do something. I never did like him sitting around guzzling beer and smelling like a pig in summer.”

The door of the apartment opened and Carl hurried in, flushed and scowling. “Don’t fix dinner for me, Betty. I’ll be at an emergency meeting.” He glanced briefly at Walsh. “Now are you satisfied? If you’d put your back to the wheel, maybe this wouldn’t have happened.”

“How soon will they get the Amendment passed?” Walsh asked.

Carl bellowed with nervous laughter. “They’ve already passed it.” He grabbed up an armload of papers from his desk and stuffed them in a waste-disposal slot. “We’ve got informants at Purist headquarters. As soon as the new councilmen were sworn in they rammed the Amendment through. They want to catch us unawares.” He grinned starkly. “But they won’t.”

The door slammed and Carl’s hurried footsteps diminished down the public hall.

“I’ve never seen him move so fast,” Betty remarked wonderingly.

Horror rose in Don Walsh as he listened to the rapid, lumbering footsteps of his brother-in-law. Outside the unit, Carl was climbing quickly into his surface car. The motor gunned, and Carl drove off. “He’s afraid,” Walsh said. “He’s in danger.”

“I guess he can take care of himself. He’s pretty big.”

Walsh shakily lit a cigarette. “Even your brother isn’t that big. It doesn’t seem possible they really mean this. Putting over an Amendment like this, forcing everybody to conform to their idea of what’s right. But it’s been in the cards for years… this is the last step on a large road.”

“I wish they’d get it over with, once and for all,” Betty complained. “Was it always this way? I don’t remember always hearing about politics when I was a child.”

“They didn’t call it politics, back in those days. The industrialists hammered away at the people to buy and consume. It centered around this hair-sweat-teeth purity; the city people got it and developed an ideology around it.”

Betty set the table and brought in the dishes of food. “You mean the Purist political movement was deliberately started?”

“They didn’t realize what a hold it was getting on them. They didn’t know their children were growing up to take such things as underarm perspiration and white teeth and nice-looking hair as the most important things in the world. Things worth fighting and dying for. Things important enough to kill those who didn’t agree.”

“The Naturalists were country people?”

“People who lived outside the cities and weren’t conditioned by the stimuli.” Walsh shook his head irritably. “Incredible, that one man will kill

another over trivialities. All through history men murdering each other over verbal nonsense, meaningless slogans instilled in them by somebody else — who sits back and benefits."

"It isn't meaningless if they believe in it."

"It's meaningless to kill another man because he has halitosis! It's meaningless to beat up somebody because he hasn't had his sweat glands removed and artificial waste-excretion tubes installed. There's going to be senseless warfare; the Naturalists have weapons stored up at party headquarters. Men'll be just as dead as if they died for something real."

"Time to eat, dear," Betty said, indicating the table.

"I'm not hungry."

"Stop sulking and eat. Or you'll have indigestion, and you know what that means."

He knew what it meant, all right. It meant his life was in danger. One belch in the presence of a Purist and it was a life and death struggle. There was no room in the same world for men who belched and men who wouldn't tolerate men who belched. Something had to give… and it had already given. The Amendment had been passed: the Naturalists' days were numbered.

"Jimmy will be late tonight," Betty said, as she helped herself to lamb chops, green peas, and creamed corn. "There's some sort of Purist celebration. Speeches, parades, torch-light rallies." She added wistfully, "I guess we can't go down and watch, can we? It'll be pretty, all the lights and voices, and marching."

"Go ahead." Listlessly, Walsh spooned up his food. He ate without tasting. "Enjoy yourself."

They were still eating, when the door burst open and Carl entered briskly. “Anything left for me?” he demanded.

Betty half-rose, astonished. “Carl! You don’t — smell any more.”

Carl seated himself and grabbed for the plate of lamb chops. Then he recollected, and daintily selected a small one, and a tiny portion of peas. “I’m hungry,” he admitted, “but not too hungry.” He ate carefully, quietly.

Walsh gazed at him dumbfounded. “What the hell happened?” he demanded. “Your hair — and your teeth and breath. *What did you do?”*

Without looking up, Carl answered, “Party tactics. We’re beating a strategical retreat. In the face of this Amendment, there’s no point in doing something foolhardy. Hell, we don’t intend to get slaughtered.” He sipped some luke-warm coffee. “As a matter of fact, we’ve gone underground.”

Walsh slowly lowered his fork. “You mean you’re not going to fight?”

“Hell, no. It’s suicide.” Carl glanced furtively around. “Now listen to me. I’m completely in conformity with the provisions of the Homey Amendment; nobody can pin a thing on me. When the cops come snooping around, keep your mouths shut. The Amendment gives the right to recant, and that’s technically what we’ve done. We’re clean; they can’t touch us. But let’s just not say anything.” He displayed a small blue card. “A Purist membership card. Backdated; we planned for any eventuality.”

“Oh, Carl!” Betty cried delightedly. “I’m so glad. You look just — *wonderful!”*

Walsh said nothing.

“What’s the matter?” Betty demanded. “Isn’t this what you wanted? You didn’t want them to fight and kill each other —” Her voice rose shrilly.

“Won’t anything satisfy you? This is what you wanted and you’re still dissatisfied. What on earth more do you want?”

There was noise below the unit. Carl sat up straight, and for an instant color left his face. He would have begun sweating if it were still possible. “That’s the conformity police,” he said thickly. “Just sit tight; they’ll make a routine check and keep on going.”

“Oh, dear,” Betty gasped. “I hope they don’t break anything. Maybe I better go and freshen up.”

“Just sit still,” Carl grated. “There’s no reason for them to suspect anything.”

When the door opened, Jimmy stood dwarfed by the green-tinted conformity police.

“There he is!” Jimmy shrilled, indicating Carl. “He’s a Naturalist official! *Smell* him!”

The police spread efficiently into the room. Standing around the immobile Carl, they examined him briefly, then moved away. “No body odor,” the police sergeant disagreed. “No halitosis. Hair thick and well-groomed.” He signalled, and Carl obediently opened his mouth. “Teeth white, totally brushed. Nothing nonacceptable. No, this man is all right.”

Jimmy glared furiously at Carl. “Pretty smart.”

Carl picked stoically at his plate of food and ignored the boy and the police.

“Apparently we’ve broken the core of Naturalist resistance,” the sergeant said into his neck-phone. “At least in this area there’s no organized opposition.”

“Good,” the phone answered. “Your area was a stronghold. We’ll go ahead and set up the compulsory purification machinery, though. It should be implemented as soon as possible.”

One of the cops turned his attention to Don Walsh. His nostrils twitched and then a harsh, oblique expression settled over his face. ”What’s your name?” he demanded.

Walsh gave his name.

The police came cautiously around him. “Body odor,” one noted. “But hair fully restored and groomed. Open your mouth.”

Walsh opened his mouth.

“Teeth clean and white. But —” The cop sniffed. “Faint halitosis… stomach variety. I don’t get it. Is he a Naturalist or isn’t he?”

“He’s not a Purist,” the sergeant said. “No Purist would have body odor. So he must be a Naturalist.”

Jimmy pushed forward. “This man,” he explained, “is only a fellow hiker. He’s not a party member.”

“You know him?”

“He’s — related to me,” Jimmy admitted.

The police took notes. “He’s been playing around with Naturalists, but he hasn’t gone the whole way?”

“He’s on the fence,” Jimmy agreed. “A quasi-Naturalist. He can be salvaged; this shouldn’t be a criminal case.”

“Remedial action,” the sergeant noted. “All right, Walsh,” he addressed Walsh. “Get your things and let’s go. The Amendment provides compulsory purification for your type of person; let’s not waste time.”

Walsh hit the sergeant in the jaw.

The sergeant sprawled foolishly, arms flapping, dazed with disbelief. The cops drew their guns hysterically and milled around the room shouting and knocking into each other. Betty began to scream wildly. Jimmy’s shrill voice was lost in the general uproar.

Walsh grabbed up a table lamp and smashed it over a cop’s head. The lights in the apartment flickered and died out; the room was a chaos of yelling blackness. Walsh encountered a body; he kicked with his knee and with a groan of pain the body settled down. For a moment he was lost in the seething din; then his fingers found the door. He pried it open and scrambled out into the public corridor.

One shape followed, as Walsh reached the descent lift. *“Why?”* Jimmy wailed unhappily. “I had it all fixed — you didn’t have to worry!”

His thin, metallic voice faded as the lift plunged down the well to the ground floor. Behind Walsh, the police were coming cautiously out into the hall; the sound of their boots echoed dismally after him.

He examined his watch. Probably, he had fifteen or twenty minutes. They’d get him, then; it was inevitable. Taking a deep breath, he stepped from the lift and as calmly as possible walked down the dark, deserted commercial corridor, between the rows of black store-entrances.

Charley was lit up and animate, when Walsh entered the ante-chamber. Two men were waiting, and a third was being interviewed. But at the sight of the expression on Walsh’s face the robot waved him instantly in.

“What is it, Don?” it asked seriously, indicating a chair. “Sit down and tell me what’s on your mind.”

Walsh told it.

When he was finished, the analyst sat back and gave a low, soundless whistle. “That’s a felony, Don. They’ll freeze you for that; it’s a provision of the new Amendment.”

“I know,” Walsh agreed. He felt no emotion. For the first time in years the ceaseless swirl of feelings and thoughts had been purged from his mind. He was a little tired and that was all.

The robot shook its head. “Well, Don, you’re finally off the fence. That’s something, at least; you’re finally moving.” It reached thoughtfully into the top drawer of its desk and got out a pad. “Is the police pick-up van here, yet?”

“I heard sirens as I came in the anteroom. It’s on its way.”

The robot’s metal fingers drummed restlessly on the surface of the big mahogany desk. “Your sudden release of inhibition marks the moment of psychological integration. You’re not undecided anymore, are you?”

“No,” Walsh said.

“Good. Well, it had to come sooner or later. I’m sorry it had to come this way, though.”

“I’m not,” Walsh said. “This was the only way possible. It’s clear to me, now. Being undecided isn’t necessarily a negative thing. Not seeing anything in slogans and organized parties and beliefs and dying can be a belief worth dying for, in itself. I thought I was without a creed… now I realize I have a very strong creed.”

The robot wasn’t listening. It scribbled something on its pad, signed it, and then expertly tore it off. “Here.” It handed the paper briskly to Walsh.

“What’s this?” Walsh demanded.

“I don’t want anything to interfere with your therapy. You’re finally coming around — and we want to keep moving.” The robot got quickly to its feet. “Good luck, Don. Show that to the police; if there’s any trouble have them call me.”

The slip was a voucher from the Federal Psychiatric Board. Walsh turned it over numbly. “You mean this’ll get me off?”

“You were acting compulsively; you weren’t responsible. There’ll be a cursory examination, of course, but nothing to worry about.” The robot slapped him good-naturedly on the back. “It was your final neurotic act… now you’re free. That was the pent-up stuff; strictly a symbolic assertion of libido — with no political significance.”

“I see,” Walsh said.

The robot propelled him firmly toward the external exit. “Now go on out there and give the slip to them.” From its metal chest the robot popped a small bottle. “And take one of these capsules before you go to sleep. Nothing serious, just a mild sedative to quiet your nerves. Everything will be all right; I’ll expect to see you again, soon. And keep this in mind: we’re finally making some real progress.”

Walsh found himself outside in the night darkness. A police van was pulled up at the entrance of the unit, a vast ominous black shape against the dead sky. A crowd of curious people had collected at a safe distance, trying to make out what was going on.

Walsh automatically put the bottle of pills away in his coat pocket. He stood for a time breathing the chill night air, the cold clear smell of darkness

and evening. Above his head a few bright pale stars glittered remotely.

“Hey,” one of the policemen shouted. He flashed his light suspiciously in Walsh’s face. “Come over here.”

“That looks like him,” another said. “Come on, buddy. Make it snappy.” Walsh brought out the voucher Charley had given him. “I’m coming,” he answered. As he walked up to the policeman he carefully tore the paper to shreds and tossed the shreds to the night wind. The wind picked the shreds up and scattered them away.

“What the hell did you do?” one of the cops demanded.

“Nothing,” Walsh answered. “I just threw away some waste paper. Something I won’t be needing.”

“What a strange one this one is,” a cop muttered, as they froze Walsh with their cold beams. “He gives me the creeps.”

“Be glad we don’t get more like him,” another said. “Except for a few guys like this, everything’s going fine.”

Walsh’s inert body was tossed in the van and the doors slammed shut. Disposal machinery immediately began consuming his body and reducing it to basic mineral elements. A moment later, the van was on its way to the next call.

Missing Parts

Introduction, by John Brunner

“Misadjustment”

“A World of Talent”

“Psi-Man Heal My Child!”

Notes

The Collected Stories of Philip K. Dick Vol.4

Philip K. Dick

The Collected Stories of Philip K. Dick Vol. 4

by Philip K. Dick

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Notes

Introduction

By James Tiptree, Jr.

How do you know you're reading Philip K. Dick?

I think, first and pervasively, it was the strangeness. Strange, Dick was and is. I think it was that which kept me combing the SF catalogs for more by him, waiting for each new book to come out. One hears it said, "X just doesn't *think* like other people." About Dick, it was true. In the stories, you can't tell what's going to happen next.

And yet his characters are seemingly designed to be ordinary people — except for the occasional screaming psychotic female who is one of Dick's specialties, and is always treated with love. They are ordinary people caught up in wildly bizarre situations, running a police force with the help of the mumblings of precognitive idiots, facing a self-replicating factory that has taken over the earth. Indeed, one of the factors in the strangeness is the care Dick takes to set his characters in the world of reality, an aspect most other writers ignore.

In how many other science fiction stories do you know what the hero does for a living when he isn't caught up in the particular plot? Oh, he may be a member of a space crew, or, vaguely, a scientist. Or Young Werther. In Dick, you are introduced to the hero's business concerns on page one. That's not literally true of the short stories in this volume (I went back and checked), but the impression of the pervasiveness of "grubby" business concerns is everywhere, especially in the novels. The hero is in the antique business, say; as each new marvel turns up, he ruminates as to whether it is saleable. When the dead talk, they offer business advice. Dick never sheds his concern that we know how his characters earn their bread and butter. It is a part of the peculiar "grittiness" of Dick's style.

Another part of the grittiness is the jerkiness of the dialog. I can never decide whether Dick's dialog is purely unreal, or more real than most. His people do not interact as much as they deliver monologs to carry on the plot, or increase the reader's awareness of a situation.

And the situations are purely Dick. His "plots" are like nothing else in SF. If Dick writes a time-travel story, say, it will have a twist on it that makes it *sui generis*. Quite typically, the central gee-whiz marvel will *not* be centered, but will come at you obliquely, in the course, for instance, of a political election.

And any relation between Dick and a nuts-and-bolts SF writer is a pure coincidence. In my more sanguine moments, I concede that he probably knows what happens when you plug in a lamp and turn it on, but beyond that there is little evidence of either technology or science. His science, such as it is, is all engaged in the technology of the soul, with a smattering of abnormal psychology.

So far I have perhaps emphasized his oddities at the expense of his merits. What keeps you reading Dick? Well, for one thing, the strangeness, as I said, but within it there is always the atmosphere of *striving*, of men desperately trying to get some necessary job done, or striving at least to understand what is striking at them. A large percentage of Dick's heroes are tortured men; Dick is expert at the machinery of despair.

And another beauty is the desolations. When Dick gives you a desolation, say after the bomb, it is a desolation unique of its kind. There is one such in this book. But amid the desolation you often find another of Dick's characteristic touches, the *little animals.*

The little animals are frequently mutants, or small robots who have taken on life. They are unexplained, simply noted by another character in passing. And what are they doing? They are striving, too. A freezing sparrow hugs a rag around itself, a mutant rat plans a construction, "peering and planning." This sense of the ongoing busy-ness of life, however doomed, of a landscape in which every element has its own life, is *trying to*

live, is typically and profoundly Dick. It carries the quality of compassion amid the hard edges and the grit, the compassion one suspects in Dick, but that never appears frontally. It is this quality of love, always quickly suppressed, that gleams across Dick's rubbled plains and makes them unique and memorable.

James Tiptree, Jr.

December, 1986

I used to believe the universe was basically hostile. And that I was misplaced in it, I was different from it… fashioned in some other universe and placed here, you see. So that it zigged while I zagged. And that it had singled me out only because there was something weird about me. I didn't really groove with the universe.

I had a lot of fears that the universe would discover just how different I was from it. My only suspicion about it was that it would find out the truth about me, and its reaction would be perfectly normal: it would get me. I didn't feel that it was malevolent, just perceptive. And there's nothing worse that a perceptive universe if there's something weird about you.

But this year I realized that that's not true. That the universe is perceptive, but it's friendly… I just don't feel that I'm different from the universe anymore.

- Philip K. Dick in an interview, 1974.

(from *ONLY APPARENTLY REAL)*

Autofac

I

Tension hung over the three waiting men. They smoked, paced back and forth, kicked aimlessly at weeds growing by the side of the road. A hot noonday sun glared down on brown fields, rows of neat plastic houses, the distant line of mountains to the west.

"Almost time," Earl Ferine said, knotting his skinny hands together. "It varies according to the load, a half second for every additional pound."

Bitterly, Morrison answered, "You've got it plotted? You're as bad as it is. Let's pretend it just *happens* to be late."

The third man said nothing. O'Neill was visiting from another settlement; he didn't know Ferine and Morrison well enough to argue with them. Instead, he crouched down and arranged the papers clipped to his aluminum check-board. In the blazing sun, O'Neill's arms were tanned, furry, glistening with sweat. Wiry, with tangled gray hair, horn-rimmed glasses, he was older than the other two. He wore slacks, a sports shirt and crepe-soled shoes. Between his fingers, his fountain pen glittered, metallic and efficient.

"What're you writing?" Ferine grumbled.

"I'm laying out the procedure we're going to employ," O'Neill said mildly. "Better to systemize it now, instead of trying at random. We want to know what we tried and what didn't work. Otherwise we'll go around in a circle. The problem we have here is one of communication; that's how I see it."

“Communication,” Morrison agreed in his deep, chesty voice. “Yes, we can’t get in touch with the damn thing. It comes, leaves off its load and goes on — there’s no contact between us and it.”

“It’s a machine,” Ferine said excitedly. “It’s dead — blind and deaf.”

“But it’s in contact with the outside world,” O’Neill pointed out. “There has to be some way to get to it. Specific semantic signals are meaningful to it; all we have to do is find those signals. Rediscover, actually. Maybe half a dozen out of a billion possibilities.”

A low rumble interrupted the three men. They glanced up, wary and alert. The time had come.

“Here it is,” Ferine said. “Okay, wise guy, let’s see you make one single change in its routine.”

The truck was massive, rumbling under its tightly packed load. In many ways, it resembled conventional human-operated transportation vehicles, but with one exception — there was no driver’s cabin. The horizontal surface was a loading stage, and the part that would normally be the headlights and radiator grill was a fibrous spongelike mass of receptors, the limited sensory apparatus of this mobile utility extension.

Aware of the three men, the truck slowed to a halt, shifted gears and pulled on its emergency brake. A moment passed as relays moved into action; then a portion of the loading surface tilted and a cascade of heavy cartons spilled down onto the roadway. With the objects fluttered a detailed inventory sheet.

“You know what to do,” O’Neill said rapidly. “Hurry up, before it gets out of here.”

Expertly, grimly, the three men grabbed up the deposited cartons and ripped the protective wrappers from them. Objects gleamed: a binocular

microscope, a portable radio, heaps of plastic dishes, medical supplies, razor blades, clothing, food. Most of the shipment, as usual, was food. The three men systematically began smashing objects. In a few minutes, there was nothing but a chaos of debris littered around them.

"That's that," O'Neill panted, stepping back. He fumbled for his check-sheet. "Now let's see what it does."

The truck had begun to move away; abruptly it stopped and backed toward them. Its receptors had taken in the fact that the three men had demolished the dropped-off portion of the load. It spun in a grinding half circle and came around to face its receptor bank in their direction. Up went its antenna; it had begun communicating with the factory. Instructions were on the way.

A second, identical load was tilted and shoved off the truck.

"We failed," Ferine groaned as a duplicate inventory sheet fluttered after the new load. "We destroyed all that stuff for nothing."

"What now?" Morrison asked O'Neill. "What's the next strategem on our board?"

"Give me a hand." O'Neill grabbed up a carton and lugged it back to the truck. Sliding the carton onto the platform, he turned for another. The other two men followed clumsily after him. They put the load back onto the truck. As the truck started forward, the last square box was again in place.

The truck hesitated. Its receptors registered the return of its load. From within its works came a low sustained buzzing.

"This may drive it crazy," O'Neill commented, sweating. "It went through its operation and accomplished nothing."

The truck made a short, abortive move toward going on. Then it swung purposefully around and, in a blur of speed, again dumped the load onto the road.

“Get them!” O’Neill yelled. The three men grabbed up the cartons and feverishly reloaded them. But as fast as the cartons were shoved back on the horizontal stage, the truck’s grapples tilted them down its far-side ramps and onto the road.

“No use,” Morrison said, breathing hard. “Water through a sieve.”

“We’re licked,” Ferine gasped in wretched agreement, “like always. We humans lose every time.”

The truck regarded them calmly, its receptors blank and impassive. It was doing its job. The planetwide network of automatic factories was smoothly performing the task imposed on it five years before, in the early days of the Total Global Conflict.

“There it goes,” Morrison observed dismally. The truck’s antenna had come down; it shifted into low gear and released its parking brake.

“One last try,” O’Neill said. He swept up one off the cartons and ripped it open. From it he dragged a ten-gallon milk tank and unscrewed the lid. “Silly as it seems.”

“This is absurd,” Ferine protested. Reluctantly, he found a cup among the littered debris and dipped it into the milk. “A kid’s game!”

The truck has paused to observe them.

“Do it,” O’Neill ordered sharply. “Exactly the way we practiced it.”

The three of them drank quickly from the milk tank, visibly allowing the milk to spill down their chins; there had to be no mistaking what they were

doing.

As planned, O’Neill was the first. His face twisting in revulsion, he hurled the cup away and violently spat the milk into the road.

“God’s sake!” he choked.

The other two did the same; stamping and loudly cursing, they kicked over the milk tank and glared accusingly at the truck.

“It’s no good!” Morrison roared.

Curious, the truck came slowly back. Electronic synapses clicked and whirred, responding to the situation; its antenna shot up like a flagpole.

“I think this is it,” O’Neill said, trembling. As the truck watched, he dragged out a second milk tank, unscrewed its lid and tasted the contents. “The same!” he shouted at the truck. “It’s just as bad!”

From the truck popped a metal cylinder. The cylinder dropped at Morrison’s feet; he quickly snatched it up and tore it open.

STATE NATURE OF DEFECT

The instruction sheets listed rows of possible defects, with neat boxes by each; a punch-stick was included to indicate the particular deficiency of the product.

“What’ll I check?” Morrison asked. “Contaminated? Bacterial? Sour? Rancid? Incorrectly labeled? Broken? Crushed? Cracked? Bent? Soiled?”

Thinking rapidly, O’Neill said, “Don’t check any of them. The factory’s undoubtedly ready to test and resample. It’ll make its own analysis and then ignore us.” His face glowed as frantic inspiration came. “Write in that blank at the bottom. It’s an open space for further data.”

“Write what?”

O’Neill said, “Write: *the product is thoroughly pizzled.”*

“What’s that?” Ferine demanded, baffled.

“Write it! It’s a semantic garble — the factory won’t be able to understand it. Maybe we can jam the works.”

With O’Neill’s pen, Morrison carefully wrote that the milk was pizzled. Shaking his head, he resealed the cylinder and returned it to the truck. The truck swept up the milk tanks and slammed its railing tidily into place. With a shriek of tires, it hurtled off. From its slot, a final cylinder bounced; the truck hurriedly departed, leaving the cylinder lying in the dust.

O’Neill got it open and held up the paper for the others to see.

A FACTORY REPRESENTATIVE

WILL BE SENT OUT.

BE PREPARED TO SUPPLY COMPLETE DATA

ON PRODUCT DEFICIENCY.

For a moment, the three men were silent. Then Ferine began to giggle. “We did it. We contacted it. We got across.”

“We sure did,” O’Neill agreed. “It never heard of a product being pizzled.”

Cut into the base of the mountains lay the vast metallic cube of the Kansas City factory. Its surface was corroded, pitted with radiation pox, cracked and scarred from the five years of war that had swept over it. Most of the factory was buried subsurface, only its entrance stages visible. The truck was a speck rumbling at high speed toward the expanse of black

metal. Presently an opening formed in the uniform surface; the truck plunged into it and disappeared inside. The entrance snapped shut.

“Now the big job remains,” O’Neill said. “Now we have to persuade it to close down operations — to shut itself off.”

II

Judith O’Neill served hot black coffee to the people sitting around the living room. Her husband talked while the others listened. O’Neill was as close to being an authority on the autofac system as could still be found.

In his own area, the Chicago region, he had shorted out the protective fence of the local factory long enough to get away with data tapes stored in its posterior brain. The factory, of course, had immediately reconstructed a better type offence. But he had shown that the factories were not infallible.

“The Institute of Applied Cybernetics,” O’Neill explained, “had complete control over the network. Blame the war. Blame the big noise along the lines of communication that wiped out the knowledge we need. In any case, the Institute failed to transmit its information to us, so we can’t transmit our information to the factories — the news that the war is over and we’re ready to resume control of industrial operations.”

“And meanwhile,” Morrison added sourly, “the damn network expands and consumes more of our natural resources all the time.”

“I get the feeling,” Judith said, “that if I stamped hard enough, I’d fall right down into a factory tunnel. They must have mines everywhere by now.”

“Isn’t there some limiting injunction?” Ferine asked nervously. “Were they set up to expand indefinitely?”

“Each factory is limited to its own operational area,” O’Neill said, “but the network itself is unbounded. It can go on scooping up our resources forever. The Institute decided it gets top priority; we mere people come second.”

“Will there be *anything* left for us?” Morrison wanted to know.

“Not unless we can stop the network’s operations. It’s already used up half a dozen basic minerals. Its search teams are out all the time, from every factory, looking everywhere for some last scrap to drag home.”

“What would happen if tunnels from two factories crossed each other?”

O’Neill shrugged. “Normally, that won’t happen. Each factory has its own special section of our planet, its own private cut of the pie for its exclusive use.”

“But it *could* happen.”

“Well, they’re raw material-tropic; as long as there’s anything left, they’ll hunt it down.” O’Neill pondered the idea with growing interest. “It’s something to consider. I suppose as things get scarcer —”

He stopped talking. A figure had come into the room; it stood silently by the door, surveying them all.

In the dull shadows, the figure looked almost human. For a brief moment, O’Neill thought it was a settlement latecomer. Then, as it moved forward, he realized that it was only quasi-human: a functional upright biped chassis, with data-receptors mounted at the top, effectors and proprioceptors mounted in a downward worm that ended in floor-grippers. Its resemblance to a human being was testimony to nature’s efficiency; no sentimental imitation was intended.

The factory representative had arrived.

It began without preamble. “This is a data-collecting machine capable of communicating on an oral basis. It contains both broadcasting and receiving apparatus and can integrate facts relevant to its line of inquiry.”

The voice was pleasant, confident. Obviously it was a tape, recorded by some Institute technician before the war. Coming from the quasi-human shape, it sounded grotesque; O'Neill could vividly imagine the dead young man whose cheerful voice now issued from the mechanical mouth of this upright construction of steel and wiring.

"One word of caution," the pleasant voice continued. "It is fruitless to consider this receptor human and to engage it in discussions for which it is not equipped. Although purposeful, it is not capable of conceptual thought; it can only reassemble material already available to it."

The optimistic voice clicked out and a second voice came on. It resembled the first, but now there were no intonations or personal mannerisms. The machine was utilizing the dead man's phonetic speech-pattern for its own communication.

"Analysis of the rejected product," it stated, "shows no foreign elements or noticeable deterioration. The product meets the continual testing-standards employed throughout the network. Rejection is therefore on a basis outside the test area; standards not available to the network are being employed."

"That's right," O'Neill agreed. Weighing his words with care, he continued, "We found the milk substandard. We want nothing to do with it. We insist on more careful output."

The machine responded presently. "The semantic content of the term 'pizzled' is unfamiliar to the network. It does not exist in the taped vocabulary. Can you present a factual analysis of the milk in terms of specific elements present or absent?"

"No," O'Neill said warily; the game he was playing was intricate and dangerous. " 'Fizzled' is an overall term. It can't be reduced to chemical constituents."

“What does ‘pizzled’ signify?” the machine asked. “Can you define it in terms of alternate semantic symbols?”

O’Neill hesitated. The representative had to be steered from its special inquiry to more general regions, to the ultimate problem of closing down the network. If he could pry it open at any point, get the theoretical discussion started…

” ‘Pizzled,’ ” he stated, “means the condition of a product that is manufactured when no need exists. It indicates the rejection of objects on the grounds that they are no longer wanted.”

The representative said, “Network analysis shows a need of high-grade pasteurized milk-substitute in this area. There is no alternate source; the network controls all the synthetic mammary-type equipment in existence.” It added, “Original taped instructions describe milk as an essential to human diet.”

O’Neill was being outwitted; the machine was returning the discussion to the specific. “We’ve decided,” he said desperately, “that we don’t *want* any more milk. We’d prefer to go without it, at least until we can locate cows.”

“That is contrary to the network tapes,” the representative objected. “There are no cows. All milk is produced synthetically.”

“Then we’ll produce it synthetically ourselves,” Morrison broke in impatiently. “Why can’t we take over the machines? My God, we’re not children! We can run our own lives!”

The factory representative moved toward the door. “Until such time as your community finds other sources of milk supply, the network will continue to supply you. Analytical and evaluating apparatus will remain in this area, conducting the customary random sampling.”

Ferine shouted futilely, “How can we find other sources? You have the whole setup! You’re running the whole show!” Following after it, he bellowed, “You say we’re not ready to run things — you claim we’re not capable. How do you know? You don’t give us a chance! We’ll never have a chance!”

O’Neill was petrified. The machine was leaving; its one-track mind had completely triumphed.

“Look,” he said hoarsely, blocking its way. “We want you to shut down, understand. We want to take over your equipment and run it ourselves. The war’s over with. Damn it, you’re not needed anymore!”

The factory representative paused briefly at the door. “The inoperative cycle,” it said, “is not geared to begin until network production merely duplicates outside production. There is at this time, according to our continual sampling, no outside production. Therefore network production continues.” Without warning, Morrison swung the steel pipe in his hand. It slashed against the machine’s shoulder and burst through the elaborate network of sensory apparatus that made up its chest. The tank of receptors shattered; bits of glass, wiring and minute parts showered everywhere.

“It’s a paradox!” Morrison yelled. “A word game — a semantic game they’re pulling on us. The Cyberneticists have it rigged.” He raised the pipe and again brought it down savagely on the unprotesting machine. “They’ve got us hamstrung. We’re completely helpless.”

The room was in uproar. “It’s the only way,” Ferine gasped as he pushed past O’Neill. “We’ll have to destroy them — it’s the network or us.” Grabbing down a lamp, he hurled it in the “face” of the factory representative. The lamp and the intricate surface of plastic burst; Ferine waded in, groping blindly for the machine. Now all the people in the room were closing furiously around the upright cylinder, their impotent resentment boiling over. The machine sank down and disappeared as they dragged it to the floor.

Trembling, O’Neill turned away. His wife caught hold of his arm and led him to the side of the room.

“The idiots,” he said dejectedly. “They can’t destroy it; they’ll only teach it to build more defenses. They’re making the whole problem worse.”

Into the living room rolled a network repair team. Expertly, the mechanical units detached themselves from the half-track mother-bug and scurried toward the mound of struggling humans. They slid between people and rapidly burrowed. A moment later, the inert carcass of the factory representative was dragged into the hopper of the mother-bug. Parts were collected, torn remnants gathered up and carried off. The plastic strut and gear was located. Then the units restationed themselves on the bug and the team departed.

Through the open door came a second factory representative, an exact duplicate of the first. And outside in the hall stood two more upright machines. The settlement had been combed at random by a corps of representatives. Like a horde of ants, the mobile data-collecting machines had filtered through the town until, by chance, one of them had come across O’Neill.

“Destruction of network mobile data-gathering equipment is detrimental to best human interests,” the factory representative informed the roomful of people. “Raw material intake is at a dangerously low ebb; what basic materials still exist should be utilized in the manufacture of consumer commodities.”

O’Neill and the machine stood facing each other.

“Oh?” O’Neill said softly. “That’s interesting. I wonder what you’re lowest on — and what you’d really be willing to fight for.”

Helicopter rotors whined tinnily above O’Neill’s head; he ignored them and peered through the cabin window at the ground not far below.

Slag and ruins stretched everywhere. Weeds poked their way up, sickly stalks among which insects scuttled. Here and there, rat colonies were visible: matted hovels constructed of bone and rubble. Radiation had mutated the rats, along with most insects and animals. A little farther, O'Neill identified a squadron of birds pursuing a ground squirrel. The squirrel dived into a carefully prepared crack in the surface of slag and the birds turned, thwarted.

"You think we'll ever have it rebuilt?" Morrison asked. "It makes me sick to look at it."

"In time," O'Neill answered. "Assuming, of course, that we get industrial control back. And assuming that anything remains to work with. At best, it'll be slow. We'll have to inch out from the settlements."

To the right was a human colony, tattered scarecrows, gaunt and emaciated, living among the ruins of what had once been a town. A few acres of barren soil had been cleared; drooping vegetables wilted in the sun, chickens wandered listlessly here and there, and a fly-bothered horse lay panting in the shade of a crude shed.

"Ruins-squatters," O'Neill said gloomily. "Too far from the network — not tangent to any of the factories."

"It's their own fault," Morrison told him angrily. "They could come into one of the settlements."

"That was their town. They're trying to do what *we 're* trying to do — build up things again on their own. But they're starting now, without tools or machines, with their bare hands, nailing together bits of rubble. And it won't work. We need machines. We can't repair ruins; we've got to start industrial production."

Ahead lay a series of broken hills, chipped remains that had once been a ridge. Beyond stretched out the titanic ugly sore of an H-bomb crater, half

filled with stagnant water and slime, a disease-ridden inland sea.

And beyond that — a glitter of busy motion.

"There," O'Neill said tensely. He lowered the helicopter rapidly. "Can you tell which factory they're from?"

"They all look alike to me," Morrison muttered, leaning over to see. "We'll have to wait and follow them back, when they get a load."

"*If they* get a load," O'Neill corrected.

The autofac exploring crew ignored the helicopter buzzing overhead and concentrated on its job. Ahead of the main truck scuttled two tractors; they made their way up mounds of rubble, probes burgeoning like quills, shot down the far slope and disappeared into a blanket of ash that lay spread over the slag. The two scouts burrowed until only their antennas were visible. They burst up to the surface and scuttled on, their treads whirring and clanking.

"What are they after?" Morrison asked.

"God knows." O'Neill leafed intently through the papers on his clipboard. "We'll have to analyze all our back-order slips."

Below them, the autofac exploring crew disappeared behind. The helicopter passed over a deserted stretch of sand and slag on which nothing moved. A grove of scrub-brush appeared and then, far to the right, a series of tiny moving dots.

A procession of automatic ore carts was racing over the bleak slag, a string of rapidly moving metal trucks that followed one another nose to tail. O'Neill turned the helicopter toward them and a few minutes later it hovered above the mine itself.

Masses of squat mining equipment had made their way to the operations. Shafts had been sunk; empty carts waited in patient rows. A steady stream of loaded carts hurled toward the horizon, dribbling ore after them. Activity and the noise of machines hung over the area, an abrupt center of industry in the bleak wastes of slag.

“Here comes that exploring crew,” Morrison observed, peering back the way they had come. “You think maybe they’ll tangle?” He grinned. “No, I guess it’s too much to hope for.”

“It is this time,” O’Neill answered. “They’re looking for different substances, probably. And they’re normally conditioned to ignore each other.”

The first of the exploring bugs reached the line of ore carts. It veered slightly and continued its search; the carts traveled in their inexorable line as if nothing had happened.

Disappointed, Morrison turned away from the window and swore. “No use. It’s like each doesn’t exist for the other.”

Gradually the exploring crew moved away from the line of carts, past the mining operations and over a ridge beyond. There was no special hurry; they departed without having reacted to the ore-gathering syndrome.

“Maybe they’re from the same factory,” Morrison said hopefully.

O’Neill pointed to the antennas visible on the major mining equipment. “Their vanes are turned at a different vector, so these represent two factories. It’s going to be hard; we’ll have to get it exactly right or there won’t be any reaction.” He clicked on the radio and got hold of the monitor at the settlement. “Any results on the consolidated back-order sheets?”

The operator put him through to the settlement governing offices.

“They’re starting to come in,” Ferine told him. “As soon as we get sufficient samplings, we’ll try to determine which raw materials which factories lack. It’s going to be risky, trying to extrapolate from complex products. There may be a number of basic elements common to the various sublets.”

“What happens when we’ve identified the missing element?” Morrison asked O’Neill. “What happens when we’ve got two tangent factories short on the same material?”

“Then,” O’Neill said grimly, “we start collecting the material ourselves — even if we have to melt down every object in the settlements.”

III

In the moth-ridden darkness of night, a dim wind stirred, chill and faint. Dense underbrush rattled metallically. Here and there a nocturnal rodent prowled, its senses hyper-alert, peering, planning, seeking food.

The area was wild. No human settlements existed for miles; the entire region had been seared flat, cauterized by repeated H-bomb blasts. Somewhere in the murky darkness, a sluggish trickle of water made its way among autofac slag and weeds, dripping thickly into what had once been an elaborate labyrinth of sewer mains. The pipes lay cracked and broken, jutting up into the night darkness, overgrown with creeping vegetation. The wind raised clouds of black ash that swirled and danced among the weeds. Once an enormous mutant wren stirred sleepily, pulled its crude protective night coat of rags around it and dozed off.

For a time, there was no movement. A streak of stars showed in the sky overhead, glowing starkly, remotely. Earl Ferine shivered, peered up and huddled closer to the pulsing heat-element placed on the ground between the three men.

“Well?” Morrison challenged, teeth chattering.

O’Neill didn’t answer. He finished his cigarette, crushed it against a mound of decaying slag and, getting out his lighter, lit another. The mass of tungsten — the bait — lay a hundred yards directly ahead of them.

During the last few days, both the Detroit and Pittsburgh factories had run short of tungsten. And in at least one sector, their apparatus overlapped. This sluggish heap represented precision cutting tools, parts ripped from electrical switches, high-quality surgical equipment, sections of permanent magnets, measuring devices — tungsten from every possible source, gathered feverishly from all the settlements.

Dark mist lay spread over the tungsten mound. Occasionally, a night moth fluttered down, attracted by the glow of reflected starlight. The moth hung momentarily, beat its elongated wings futilely against the interwoven tangle of metal and then drifted off, into the shadows of the thick-packed vines that rose up from the stumps of sewer pipes.

“Not a very damn pretty spot,” Ferine said wryly.

“Don’t kid yourself,” O’Neill retorted. “This is the prettiest spot on Earth. This is the spot that marks the grave of the autofac network. People are going to come around here looking for it someday. There’s going to be a plaque here a mile high.”

“You’re trying to keep your morale up,” Morrison snorted. “You don’t believe they’re going to slaughter themselves over a heap of surgical tools and light-bulb filaments. They’ve probably got a machine down in the bottom level that sucks tungsten out of rock.”

“Maybe,” O’Neill said, slapping at a mosquito. The insect dodged cannily and then buzzed over to annoy Ferine. Ferine swung viciously at it and squatted sullenly down against the damp vegetation.

And there was what they had come to see.

O’Neill realized with a start that he had been looking at it for several minutes without recognizing it. The search-bug lay absolutely still. It rested at the crest of a small rise of slag, its anterior end slightly raised, receptors fully extended. It might have been an abandoned hulk; there was no activity of any kind, no sign of life or consciousness. The search-bug fitted perfectly into the wasted, fire-drenched landscape. A vague tub of metal sheets and gears and flat treads, it rested and waited. And watched.

It was examining the heap of tungsten. The bait had drawn its first bite.

“Fish,” Ferine said thickly. “The line moved. I think the sinker dropped.”

“What the hell are you mumbling about?” Morrison grunted. And then he, too, saw the search-bug. “Jesus,” he whispered. He half rose to his feet, massive body arched forward. “Well, there’s *one* of them. Now all we need is a unit from the other factory. Which do you suppose it is?”

O’Neill located the communication vane and traced its angle. “Pittsburgh, so pray for Detroit… pray like mad.”

Satisfied, the search-bug detached itself and rolled forward. Cautiously approaching the mound, it began a series of intricate maneuvers, rolling first one way and then another. The three watching men were mystified — until they glimpsed the first probing stalks of other search-bugs.

“Communication,” O’Neill said softly. “Like bees.”

Now five Pittsburgh search-bugs were approaching the mound of tungsten products. Receptors waving excitedly, they increased their pace, scurrying in a sudden burst of discovery up the side of the mound to the top. A bug burrowed and rapidly disappeared; The whole mound shuddered; the bug was down inside, exploring the extent of the find.

Ten minutes later, the first Pittsburgh ore carts appeared and began industriously hurrying off with their haul.

“Damn it!” O’Neill said, agonized. “They’ll have it all before Detroit shows up.”

“Can’t we do anything to slow them down?” Ferine demanded helplessly. Leaping to his feet, he grabbed up a rock and heaved it at the nearest cart. The rock bounced off and the cart continued its work, unperturbed.

O’Neill got to his feet and prowled around, body rigid with impotent fury. Where were they? The autofacs were equal in all respects and the spot was the exact same linear distance from each center. Theoretically, the parties should have arrived simultaneously. Yet there was no sign of Detroit — and the final pieces of tungsten were being loaded before his eyes.

But then something streaked past him.

He didn’t recognize it, for the object moved too quickly. It shot like a bullet among the tangled vines, raced up the side of the hill-crest, poised for an instant to aim itself and hurtled down the far side. It smashed directly into the lead cart. Projectile and victim shattered in an abrupt burst of sound.

Morrison leaped up. “What the hell?”

“That’s it!” Ferine screamed, dancing around and waving his skinny arms. “It’s Detroit!”

A second Detroit search-bug appeared, hesitated as it took in the situation, and then flung itself furiously at the retreating Pittsburgh carts. Fragments of tungsten scattered everywhere — parts, wiring, broken plates, gears and springs and bolts of the two antagonists flew in all directions. The remaining carts wheeled screechingly; one of them dumped its load and rattled off at top speed. A second followed, still weighed down with tungsten. A Detroit search-bug caught up with it, spun directly in its path and neatly overturned it. Bug and cart rolled down a shallow trench, into a stagnant pool of water. Dripping and glistening, the two of them struggled, half submerged.

“Well,” O’Neill said unsteadily, “we did it. We can start back home.” His legs felt weak. “Where’s our vehicle?”

As he gunned the truck motor, something flashed a long way off, something large and metallic, moving over the dead slag and ash. It was a

dense clot of carts, a solid expanse of heavyduty ore carriers racing to the scene. Which factory were they from?

It didn't matter, for out of the thick tangle of black dripping vines, a web of counter-extensions was creeping to meet them. Both factories were assembling their mobile units. From all directions, bugs slithered and crept, closing in around the remaining heap of tungsten. Neither factory was going to let needed raw material get away; neither was going to give up its find. Blindly, mechanically, in the grip of inflexible directives, the two opponents labored to assemble superior forces.

"Come on," Morrison said urgently. "Let's get out of here. All hell is bursting loose."

O'Neill hastily turned the truck in the direction of the settlement. They began rumbling through the darkness on their way back. Every now and then, a metallic shape shot by them, going in the opposite direction.

"Did you see the load in that last cart?" Ferine asked, worried. "It wasn't empty."

Neither were the carts that followed it, a whole procession of bulging supply carriers directed by an elaborate high-level surveying unit.

"Guns," Morrison said, eyes wide with apprehension. "They're taking in weapons. But who's going to use them?"

"They are," O'Neill answered. He indicated a movement to their right. "Look over there. This is something we hadn't expected."

They were seeing the first factory representative move into action.

As the truck pulled into the Kansas City settlement, Judith hurried breathlessly toward them. Fluttering in her hand was a strip of metal-foil

paper.

“What is it?” O’Neill demanded, grabbing it from her.

“Just come.” His wife struggled to catch her breath. “A mobile car raced up, dropped it off and left. Big excitement. Golly, the factory’s a blaze of lights. You can see it for miles.”

O’Neill scanned the paper. It was a factory certification for the last group of settlement-placed orders, a total tabulation of requested and factory-analyzed needs. Stamped across the list in heavy black type were six foreboding words:

ALL SHIPMENTS SUSPENDED UNTIL FURTHER NOTICE

Letting out his breath harshly, O’Neill handed the paper over to Ferine. “No more consumer goods,” he said ironically, a nervous grin twitching across his face. “The network’s going on a wartime footing.”

“Then we did it?” Morrison asked haltingly.

“That’s right,” O’Neill said. Now that the conflict had been sparked, he felt a growing, frigid terror. “Pittsburgh and Detroit are in it to the finish. It’s too late for us to change our minds, now — they’re lining up allies.”

IV

Cool morning sunlight lay across the ruined plain of black metallic ash. The ash smoldered a dull, unhealthy red; it was still warm.

"Watch your step," O'Neill cautioned. Grabbing hold of his wife's arm, he led her from the rusty, sagging truck, up onto the top of a pile of strewn concrete blocks, the scattered remains of a pillbox installation. Earl Ferine followed, making his way carefully, hesitantly.

Behind them, the dilapidated settlement lay spread out, a disorderly checkerboard of houses, buildings and streets. Since the autofac network had closed down its supply and maintenance, the human settlements had fallen into semibarbarism. The commodities that remained were broken and only partly usable. It had been over a year since the last mobile factory truck had appeared, loaded with food, tools, clothing and repair parts. From the flat expanse of dark concrete and metal at the foot of the mountains, nothing had emerged in their direction.

Their wish had been granted — they were cut off, detached from the network.

On their own.

Around the settlement grew ragged fields of wheat and tattered stalks of sun-baked vegetables. Crude handmade tools had been distributed, primitive artifacts hammered out with great labor by the various settlements. The settlements were linked only by horsedrawn carts and by the slow stutter of the telegraph key.

They had managed to keep their organization, though. Goods and services were exchanged on a slow, steady basis. Basic commodities were produced and distributed. The clothing that O'Neill and his wife and Earl

Ferine wore was coarse and unbleached, but sturdy. And they had managed to convert a few of the trucks from gasoline to wood.

“Here we are,” O’Neill said. “We can see from here.”

“Is it worth it?” Judith asked, exhausted. Bending down, she plucked aimlessly at her shoe, trying to dig a pebble from the soft hide sole. “It’s a long way to come, to see something we’ve seen every day for thirteen months.”

“True,” O’Neill admitted, his hand briefly resting on his wife’s limp shoulder. “But this may be the last. And that’s what we want to see.”

In the gray sky above them, a swift circling dot of opaque black moved. High, remote, the dot spun and darted, following an intricate and wary course. Gradually, its gyrations moved it toward the mountains and the bleak expanse of bomb-rubbled structure sunk in their base.

“San Francisco,” O’Neill explained. “One of those long-range hawk projectiles, all the way from the West Coast.”

“And you think it’s the last?” Ferine asked.

“It’s the only one we’ve seen this month.” O’Neill seated himself and began sprinkling dried bits of tobacco into a trench of brown paper. “And we used to see hundreds.”

“Maybe they have something better,” Judith suggested. She found a smooth rock and tiredly seated herself. “Could it be?”

Her husband smiled ironically. “No. They don’t have anything better.”

The three of them were tensely silent. Above them, the circling dot of black drew closer. There was no sign of activity from the flat surface of metal and concrete; the Kansas City factory remained inert, totally

unresponsive. A few billows of warm ash drifted across it and one end was partly submerged in rubble. The factory had taken numerous direct hits. Across the plain, the furrows of its subsurface tunnels lay exposed, clogged with debris and the dark, water-seeking tendrils of tough vines.

“Those damn vines,” Ferine grumbled, picking at an old sore on his unshaven chin. “They’re taking over the world.”

Here and there around the factory, the demolished ruin of a mobile extension rusted in the morning dew. Carts, trucks, search-bugs, factory representatives, weapons carriers, guns, supply trains, subsurface projectiles, indiscriminate parts of machinery mixed and fused together in shapeless piles. Some had been destroyed returning to the factory; others had been contacted as they emerged, fully loaded, heavy with equipment. The factory itself — what remained of it — seemed to have settled more deeply into the earth. Its upper surface was barely visible, almost lost in drifting ash.

In four days, there had been no known activity, no visible movement of any sort.

“It’s dead,” Ferine said. “You can see it’s dead.”

O’Neill didn’t answer. Squatting down, he made himself comfortable and prepared to wait. In his own mind, he was sure that some fragment of automation remained in the eroded factory. Time would tell. He examined his wristwatch; it was eight thirty. In the old days, the factory would be starting its daily routine. Processions of trucks and varied mobile units would be coming to the surface, loaded with supplies, to begin their expeditions to the human settlement.

Off to the right, something stirred. He quickly turned his attention to it.

A single battered ore-gathering cart was creeping clumsily toward the factory. One last damaged mobile unit trying to complete its task. The cart

was virtually empty; a few meager scraps of metal lay strewn in its hold. A scavenger… the metal was sections ripped from destroyed equipment encountered on the way. Feebly, like a blind metallic insect, the cart approached the factory. Its progress was incredibly jerky. Every now and then, it halted, bucked and quivered, and wandered aimlessly off the path.

“Control is bad,” Judith said, with a touch of horror in her voice. “The factory’s having trouble guiding it back.”

Yes, he had seen that. Around New York, the factory had lost its high-frequency transmitter completely. Its mobile units had floundered in crazy gyrations, racing in random circles, crashing against rocks and trees, sliding into gullies, overturning, finally unwinding and becoming reluctantly inanimate.

The ore cart reached the edge of the ruined plain and halted briefly. Above it, the dot of black still circled the sky. For a time, the cart remained frozen.

“The factory’s trying to decide,” Ferine said. “It needs the material, but it’s afraid of that hawk up there.”

The factory debated and nothing stirred. Then the ore cart again resumed its unsteady crawl. It left the tangle of vines and started out across the blasted open plain. Painfully, with infinite caution, it headed toward the slab of dark concrete and metal at the base of the mountains.

The hawk stopped circling.

“Get down!” O’Neill said sharply. “They’ve got those rigged with the new bombs.”

His wife and Perine crouched down beside him and the three of them peered warily at the plain and the metal insect crawling laboriously across it. In the sky, the hawk swept in a straight line until it hung directly over the

cart. Then, without a sound or warning, it came down in a straight dive. Hands to her face, Judith shrieked, “I can’t watch! It’s awful! Like wild animals!”

“It’s not after the cart,” O’Neill grated.

As the airborne projectile dropped, the cart put on a burst of desperate speed. It raced noisily toward the factory, clanking and rattling, trying in a last futile attempt to reach safely. Forgetting the menace above, the frantically eager factory opened up and guided its mobile unit directly inside. And the hawk had what it wanted.

Before the barrier could close, the hawk swooped down in a long glide parallel with the ground. As the cart disappeared into the depths of the factory, the hawk shot after it, a swift shimmer of metal that hurtled past the clanking cart. Suddenly aware, the factory snapped the barrier shut. Grotesquely, the cart struggled; it was caught fast in the half-closed entrance.

But whether it freed itself didn’t matter. There was a dull rumbling stir. The ground moved, billowed, then settled back. A deep shock wave passed beneath the three watching human beings. From the factory rose a single column of black smoke. The surface of concrete split like a dried pod; it shriveled and broke, and dribbled shattered bits of itself in a shower of ruin. The smoke hung for a while, drifting aimlessly away with the morning wind.

The factory was a fused, gutted wreck. It had been penetrated and destroyed.

O’Neill got stiffly to his feet. “That’s all. All over with. We’ve got what we set out after — we’ve destroyed the autofac network.” He glanced at Perine. “Or was that what we were after?”

They looked toward the settlement that lay behind them. Little remained of the orderly rows of houses and streets of the previous years. Without the

network, the settlement had rapidly decayed. The original prosperous neatness had dissipated; the settlement was shabby, ill-kept.

“Of course,” Perine said haltingly. “Once we get into the factories and start setting up our own assembly lines…”

“Is there anything left?” Judith inquired.

“There must be something left. My God, there were levels going down miles!”

“Some of those bombs they developed toward the end were awfully big,” Judith pointed out. “Better than anything we had in our war.”

“Remember that camp we saw? The ruins-squatters?”

“I wasn’t along,” Perine said.

“They were like wild animals. Eating roots and larvae. Sharpening rocks, tanning hides. Savagery, bestiality.”

“But that’s what people like that want,” Perine answered defensively

“Do they? Do we want this?” O’Neill indicated the straggling settlement. “Is this what we set out looking for, that day we collected the tungsten? Or that day we told the factory truck its milk was —” He couldn’t remember the word.

“Pizzled,” Judith supplied.

“Come on,” O’Neill said. “Let’s get started. Let’s see what’s left of that factory — left for us.”

They approached the ruined factory late in the afternoon. Four trucks rumbled shakily up to the rim of the gutted pit and halted, motors steaming,

tailpipes dripping. Wary and alert, workmen scrambled down and stepped gingerly across the hot ash.

"Maybe it's too soon," one of them objected.

O'Neill had no intention of waiting. "Come on," he ordered. Grabbing up a flashlight, he stepped down into the crater.

The sheltered hull of the Kansas City factory lay directly ahead. In its gutted mouth, the ore cart still hung caught, but it was no longer struggling. Beyond the cart was an ominous pool of gloom. O'Neill flashed his light through the entrance; the tangled, jagged remains of upright supports were visible.

"We want to get down deep," he said to Morrison, who prowled cautiously beside him. "If there's anything left, it's at the bottom."

Morrison grunted. "Those boring moles from Atlanta got most of the deep layers."

"Until the others got their mines sunk." O'Neill stepped carefully through the sagging entrance, climbed a heap of debris that had been tossed against the slit from inside, and found himself within the factory — an expanse of confused wreckage, without pattern or meaning.

"Entropy," Morrison breathed, oppressed. "The thing it always hated. The thing it was built to fight. Random particles everywhere. No purpose to it."

"Down underneath," O'Neill said stubbornly, "we may find some sealed enclaves. I know they got so they were dividing up into autonomous sections, trying to preserve repair units intact, to re-form the composite factory."

“The moles got most of them, too,” Morrison observed, but he lumbered after O’Neill.

Behind them, the workmen came slowly. A section of wreckage shifted ominously and a shower of hot fragments cascaded down.

“You men get back to the trucks,” O’Neill said. “No sense endangering any more of us than we have to. If Morrison and I don’t come back, forget us — don’t risk sending a rescue party.” As they left, he pointed out to Morrison a descending ramp still partially intact. “Let’s get below.”

Silently, the two men passed one dead level after another. Endless miles of dark ruin stretched out, without sound or activity. The vague shapes of darkened machinery, unmoving belts and conveyer equipment were partially visible, and the partially completed husks of war projectiles, bent and twisted by the final blast.

“We can salvage some of that,” O’Neill said, but he didn’t actually believe it. The machinery was fused, shapeless. Everything in the factory had run together, molten slag without form or use. “Once we get it to the surface …”

“We can’t,” Morrison contradicted bitterly. “We don’t have hoists or winches.” He kicked at a heap of charred supplies that had stopped along its broken belt and spilled halfway across the ramp.

“It seemed like a good idea at the time,” O’Neill said as the two of them continued past vacant levels of machines. “But now that I look back, I’m not so sure.”

They had penetrated a long way into the factory. The final level lap spread out ahead of them. O’Neill flashed the light here and there, trying to locate undestroyed sections, portions of the assembly process still intact.

It was Morrison who felt it first. He suddenly dropped to his hands and knees; heavy body pressed against the floor, he lay listening, face hard, eyes wide. “For God’s sake —”

“What is it?” O’Neill cried. Then he, too, felt it. Beneath them, a faint, insistent vibration hummed through the floor, a steady hum of activity. They had been wrong; the hawk had not been totally successful. Below, in a deeper level, the factory was still alive. Closed, limited operations still went on.

“On its own,” O’Neill muttered, searching for an extension of the descent lift. “Autonomous activity, set to continue after the rest is gone. How do we get down?”

The descent lift was broken off, sealed by a thick section of metal. The still-living layer beneath their feet was completely cut off; there was no entrance.

Racing back the way they had come, O’Neill reached the surface and hailed the first truck. “Where the hell’s the torch? Give it here!”

The precious blowtorch was passed to him and he hurried back, puffing, into the depths of the ruined factory where Morrison waited. Together, the two of them began frantically cutting through the warped metal flooring, burning apart the sealed layers of protective mesh.

“It’s coming,” Morrison gasped, squinting in the glare of the torch. The plate fell with a clang, disappearing into the level below. A blaze of white light burst up around them and the two men leaped back.

In the sealed chamber, furious activity boomed and echoed, a steady process of moving belts, whirring machine-tools, fast-moving mechanical supervisors. At one end, a steady flow of raw materials entered the line; at the far end, the final product was whipped off, inspected and crammed into a conveyer tube.

All this was visible for a split second; then the intrusion was discovered. Robot relays came into play. The blaze of lights flickered and dimmed. The assembly line froze to a halt, stopped in its furious activity.

The machines clicked off and became silent.

At one end, a mobile unit detached itself and sped up the wall toward the hole O'Neill and Morrison had cut. It slammed an emergency seal in place and expertly welded it tight. The scene below was gone. A moment later the floor shivered as activity resumed.

Morrison, white-faced and shaking, turned to O'Neill. "What are they doing? What are they making?"

"Not weapons," O'Neill said.

"That stuff is being sent up" — Morrison gestured convulsively — "to the surface."

Shakily, O'Neill climbed to his feet. "Can we locate the spot?"

"I — think so."

"We better." O'Neill swept up the flashlight and started toward the ascent ramp. "We're going to have to see what those pellets are that they're shooting up."

The exit valve of the conveyor tube was concealed in a tangle of vines and ruins a quarter of a mile beyond the factory. In a slot of rock at the base of the mountains the valve poked up like a nozzle. From ten yards away, it was invisible; the two men were almost on top of it before they noticed it.

Every few moments, a pellet burst from the valve and shot up into the sky. The nozzle revolved and altered its angle of deflection; each pellet was launched in a slightly varied trajectory.

“How far are they going?” Morrison wondered.

“Probably varies. It’s distributing them at random.” O’Neill advanced cautiously, but the mechanism took no note of him. Plastered against the towering wall of rock was a crumpled pellet; by accident, the nozzle had released it directly at the mountainside. O’Neill climbed up, got it and jumped down.

The pellet was a smashed container of machinery, tiny metallic elements too minute to be analyzed without a microscope.

“Not a weapon,” O’Neill said.

The cylinder had split. At first he couldn’t tell if it had been the impact or deliberate internal mechanisms at work. From the rent, an ooze of metal bits was sliding. Squatting down, O’Neill examined them.

The bits were in motion. Microscopic machinery, smaller than ants, smaller than pins, working energetically, purposefully — constructing something that looked like a tiny rectangle of steel.

“They’re building,” O’Neill said, awed. He got up and prowled on. Off to the side, at the far edge of the gully, he came across a downed pellet far advanced on its construction. Apparently it had been released some time ago.

This one had made great enough progress to be identified. Minute as it was, the structure was familiar. The machinery was building a miniature replica of the demolished factory.

“Well,” O’Neill said thoughtfully, “we’re back where we started from. For better or worse… I don’t know.”

“I guess they must be all over Earth by now,” Morrison said, “landing everywhere and going to work.”

A thought struck O’Neill. “Maybe some of them are geared to escape velocity. That would be neat — autofac networks throughout the whole universe.” Behind him, the nozzle continued to spurt out its torrent of metal seeds.

Service Call

It would be wise to explain what Courtland was doing just before the doorbell rang.

In his swank apartment on Leavenworth Street where Russian Hill drops to the flat expanse of North Beach and finally to the San Francisco Bay itself, David Courtland sat hunched over a series of routine reports, a week's file of technical data dealing with the results of the Mount Diablo tests. As research director for Pesco Paints, Courtland was concerning himself with the comparative durability of various surfaces manufactured by his company. Treated shingles had baked and sweated in the California heat for five hundred and sixty-four days. It was now time to see which pore-filler withstood oxidation, and to adjust production schedules accordingly.

Involved with his intricate analytical data, Courtland at first failed to hear the bell. In the corner of the living room his high-fidelity Bogen amplifier, turntable, and speaker were playing a Schumann symphony. His wife, Fay, was doing the dinner dishes in the kitchen. The two children, Bobby and Ralf, were already in their bunk beds, asleep. Reaching for his pipe, Courtland leaned back from the desk a moment, ran a heavy hand through his thinning gray hair … and heard the bell.

"Damn," he said. Vaguely, he wondered how many times the demure chimes had sounded; he had a dim subliminal memory of repeated attempts to attract his attention. Before his tired eyes the mass of report sheets wavered and receded. Who the hell was it? His watch read only nine-thirty; he couldn't really complain, yet.

"Want me to get it?" Fay called brightly from the kitchen.

“I’ll get it.” Wearily, Courtland got to his feet, stuffed his feet into his shoes, and plodded across the room, past the couch, floor lamp, magazine rack, the phonograph, the bookcase, to the door. He was a heavyset middle-aged technologist, and he didn’t like people interrupting his work.

In the halls stood an unfamiliar visitor. “Good evening, sir,” the visitor said, intently examining a clipboard; “I’m sorry to bother you.”

Courtland glared sourly at the young man. A salesman, probably. Thin, blond-haired, in a white shirt, bow tie, single-breasted blue suit, the young man stood gripping his clipboard in one hand and a bulging black suitcase with the other. His bony features were set in an expression of serious concentration. There was an air of studious confusion about him; brow wrinkled, lips tight together, the muscles of his cheeks began to twitch into overt worry. Glancing up he asked, “Is this 1846 Leavenworth? Apartment 3A?”

“That’s right,” Courtland said, with the infinite patience due a dumb animal.

The taut frown on the young man’s face relaxed a trifle. “Yes, sir,” he said, in his urgent tenor. Peering past Courtland into the apartment, he said, “I’m sorry to bother you in the evening when you’re working, but as you probably know we’ve been pretty full up the last couple of days. That’s why we couldn’t answer your call sooner.”

“My call?” Courtland echoed. Under his unbuttoned collar, he was beginning to glow a dull red. Undoubtedly something Fay had got him mixed up in; something she thought he should look into, something vital to gracious living. “What the hell are you talking about?” he demanded. “Come to the point.”

The young man flushed, swallowed noisily, tried to grin, and then hurried on huskily, “Sir, I’m the repairman you asked for; I’m here to fix your swibble.”

The facetious retort that came to Courtland's mind was one that later on he wished he had used. "Maybe," he wished he had said, "I don't want my swibble fixed. Maybe I like my swibble the way it is." But he didn't say that. Instead, he blinked, pulled the door in slightly, and said, "My *what!"*

"Yes, sir," the young man persisted. "The record of your swibble installation came to us as a matter of course. Usually we make an automatic adjustment inquiry, but your call preceded that — so I'm here with complete service equipment. Now, as to the nature of your particular complaint…" Furiously, the young man pawed through the sheaf of papers on his clipboard. "Well, there's no point in looking for that; you can tell me orally. As you probably know, sir, we're not officially a part of the vending corporation… we have what is called an *insurance-type* coverage that comes into existence automatically, when your purchase is made. Of course, you can cancel the arrangement with us." Feebly, he tried a joke. "I have heard there're a couple of competitors in the service business."

Stern morality replaced humor. Pulling his lank body upright, he finished, "But let me say that we've been in the swibble repair business ever since old R.J. Wright introduced the first A-driven experimental model."

For a time, Courtland said nothing. Phantasmagoria swirled through his mind: random quasi-technological thoughts, reflex evaluations and notations of no importance. So swibbles broke right down, did they? Big-time business operations … send out a repairman as soon as the deal is closed. Monopoly tactics … squeeze out the competition before they have a chance. Kickback to the parent company, probably. Interwoven books.

But none of his thoughts got down to the basic issue. With a violent effort he forced his attention back onto the earnest young man who waited nervously in the hall with his black service kit and clipboard. "No," Courtland said emphatically, "no, you've got the wrong address."

“Yes, sir?” the young man quavered politely, a wave of stricken dismay crossing his features. “The wrong address? Good Lord, has dispatch got another route fouled up with that new-fangled —”

“Better look at your paper again,” Courtland said, grimly pulling the door toward him. “Whatever the hell a swibble is, I haven’t got one; and I didn’t call you.”

As he shut the door, he perceived the final horror on the young man’s face, his stupefied paralysis. Then the brightly painted wood surface cut off the sight, and Courtland turned wearily back to his desk.

A swibble. What the hell was a swibble? Seating himself moodily, he tried to take up where he had left off… but the direction of his thoughts had been totally shattered.

There was no such thing as a swibble. And he was on the in, industrially speaking. He read *U.S. News*, the *Wall Street Journal.* If there was a swibble he would have heard about it — unless a swibble was some pipsqueak gadget for the home. Maybe that was it.

“Listen,” he yelled at his wife as Fay appeared momentarily at the kitchen door, dishcloth and blue-willow plate in her hands. “What is this business? You know anything about swibbles?”

Fay shook her head. “It’s nothing of mine.”

“You didn’t order a chrome-and-plastic a.c.-d.c. swibble from Macy’s?”

“Certainly not.”

Maybe it was something for the kids. Maybe it was the latest grammar-school craze, the contemporary bolo or flip cards or knock-knock-who’s-there? But nine-year-old kids didn’t buy things that needed a service man carrying a massive black tool kit — not on fifty cents a week allowance.

Curiosity overcame aversion. He had to know, just for the record, what a swibble was. Springing to his feet, Courtland hurried to the hall door and yanked it open.

The hall was empty, of course. The young man had wandered off. There was a faint smell of men's cologne and nervous perspiration, nothing more.

Nothing more, except a wadded-up fragment of paper that had come unclipped from the man's board. Courtland bent down and retrieved it from the carpet. It was a carbon copy of a route-instruction, giving code-identification, the name of the service company, the address of the caller.

1846 Leavenworth Street S.F. v-call rec'd Ed Fuller 9:20 P.M. 5-28. Swibble 30s15H (deluxe). Suggest check lateral feedback & neural replacement bank. AAw3-6.

The numbers, the information, meant nothing to Courtland. He closed the door and slowly returned to his desk. Smoothing out the crumpled sheet of paper, he reread the dull words again, trying to squeeze some meaning from them. The printed letterhead was:

ELECTRONIC SERVICE INDUSTRIES

455 Montgomery Street, San Francisco 14. Ri8-4456n

Est. 1963

That was it. The meager printed statement: Established in 1963. Hands trembling, Courtland reached mechanically for his pipe. Certainly, it explained why he had never heard of swibbles. It explained why he didn't own one… and why, no matter how many doors in the apartment building he knocked on, the young repairman wouldn't find anybody who did.

Swibbles hadn't been invented yet.

After an interval of hard, furious thought Courtland picked up the phone and dialed the home number of his subordinate at the Pesco labs.

"I don't care," he said carefully, "what you're doing this evening. I'm going to give you a list of instructions and I want them carried out right away."

At the other end of the line Jack Hurley could be heard pulling himself angrily together. "Tonight? Listen, Dave, the company isn't my mother — I have some life of my own. If I'm supposed to come running down —"

"This has nothing to do with Pesco. I want a tape recorder and a movie camera with infrared lens. I want you to round up a legal stenographer. I want one of the company electricians — you pick him out, but get the best. And I want Anderson from the engineering room. If you can't get him, get any of our designers. And I want somebody off the assembly line; get me some old mechanic who knows his stuff. Who really knows machines."

Doubtfully, Hurley said, "Well, you're the boss; at least, you're boss of research. But I think this will have to be cleared with the company. Would you mind if I went over your head and got an okay from Pesbroke?"

"Go ahead." Courtland made a quick decision. "Better yet, I'll call him myself; he'll probably have to know what's going on."

"What *is* going on?" Hurley demanded curiously. "I never heard you sound this way before … has somebody brought out a self-spraying paint?"

Courtland hung up the phone, waited out a torturous interval, and then dialed his superior, the owner of Pesco Paint.

"You have a minute?" he asked tightly, when Pesbroke's wife had roused the white-haired old man from his after-dinner nap and got him to the phone. "I'm mixed up in something big; I want to talk to you about it."

“Has it got to do with paint?” Pesbroke muttered, half humorously, half seriously. “If not —”

Courtland interrupted him. Speaking slowly, he gave a full account of his contact with the swibble repairman.

When Courtland had finished, his employer was silent. “Well,” Pesbroke said finally, “I guess I could go through some kind of routine. But you’ve got me interested. All right, I’ll buy it. But,” he added quietly, “if this is an elaborate time-waster, I’m going to bill you for the use of the men and equipment.”

“By time-waster, you mean if nothing profitable comes out of this?”

“No,” Pesbroke said. “I mean, if you *know* it’s a fake; if you’re consciously going along with a gag. I’ve got a migraine headache and I’m not going along with a gag. If you’re serious, if you really think this might be something, I’ll put the expenses on the company books.”

“I’m serious,” Courtland said. “You and I are both too damn old to play games.”

“Well,” Pesbroke reflected, “the older you get, the more you’re apt to go off the deep end; and this sounds pretty deep.” He could be heard making up his mind. “I’ll telephone Hurley and give him the okay. You can have whatever you want… I suppose you’re going to try to pin this repairman down and find out what he really is.”

“That’s what I want to do.”

“Suppose he’s on the level… what then?”

“Well,” Courtland said cautiously, “then I want to find out what a swibble is. As a starter. Maybe after that —”

“You think he’ll be back?”

“He might be. He won’t find the right address; I know that. Nobody in *this* neighborhood called for a swibble repairman.”

“What do you care what a swibble is? Why don’t you find out how he got from his period back here?”

“I think he knows what a swibble is — and I don’t think he knows how he got here. He doesn’t even know he’s here.”

Pesbroke agreed. “That’s reasonable. If I come over, will you let me in? I’d sort of enjoy watching.”

“Sure,” Courtland said, perspiring, his eye on the closed door to the hall.

“But you’ll have to watch from the other room. I don’t want anything to foul this up … we may never have another chance like this.”

Grumpily, the jury-rigged company team filed into the apartment and stood waiting for Courtland to instruct. Jack Hurley, in aloha sports shirt, slacks, and crepe-soled shoes, clodded resentfully over to Courtland and waved his cigar in his face. “Here we are; I don’t know what you told Pesbroke, but you certainly pulled him along.” Glancing around the apartment, he asked, “Can I assume we’re going to get the pitch now? There’s not much these people can do unless they understand what they’re after.”

In the bedroom doorway stood Courtland’s two sons, eyes half-shut with sleep. Fay nervously swept them up and herded them back into the bedroom. Around the living room the various men and women took up uncertain positions, their faces registering outrage, uneasy curiosity, and bored indifference. Anderson, the designing engineer, acted aloof and blase. MacDowell, the stoop-shouldered, pot-bellied lathe operator, glared with proletarian resentment at the expensive furnishings of the apartment, and

then sank into embarrassed apathy as he perceived his own work boots and grease-saturated pants. The recording specialist was trailing wire from his microphones to the tape recorder set up in the kitchen. A slim young woman, the legal stenographer, was trying to make herself comfortable in a chair in the corner. On the couch, Parkinson, the plant emergency electrician, was glancing idly through a copy of *Fortune*.

"Where's the camera equipment?" Courtland demanded.

"Coming," Hurley answered. "Are you trying to catch somebody trying out the old Spanish Treasure bunco?"

"I wouldn't need an engineer and an electrician for that," Courtland said dryly. Tensely, he paced around the living room. "Probably he won't even show up; he's probably back in his own time, by now, or wandering around God knows where."

"Who?" Hurley shouted, puffing gray cigar smoke in growing agitation. "What's going on?"

"A man knocked on my door," Courtland told him briefly. "He talked about some machinery, equipment I never heard of. Something called a swibble."

Around the room blank looks passed back and forth.

"Let's guess what a swibble is," Courtland continued grimly. "Anderson, you start. What would a swibble be?"

Anderson grinned. "A fish hook that chases down fish."

Parkinson volunteered a guess. "An English car with only one wheel."

Grudgingly, Hurley came next. "Something dumb. A machine for house-breaking pets."

“A new plastic bra,” the legal stenographer suggested.

“I don’t know,” MacDowell muttered resentfully. “I never heard of anything like that.”

“All right,” Courtland agreed, again examining his watch. He was getting close to hysteria; an hour had passed and there was no sign of the repairman. “We don’t know; we can’t even guess. But someday, nine years from now, a man named Wright is going to invent a swibble, and it’s going to become big business. People are going to make them; people are going to buy them and pay for them; repairmen are going to come around and service them.”

The door opened and Pesbroke entered the apartment, overcoat over his arm, crushed Stetson hat clamped over his head. “Has he showed up again?” His ancient, alert eyes darted around the room. “You people look ready to go.”

“No sign of him,” Courtland said drearily. “Damn it — I sent him off; I didn’t grasp it until he was gone.” He showed Pesbroke the crumpled carbon.

“I see,” Pesbroke said, handing it back. “And if he comes back you’re going to tape what he says, and photograph everything he has in the way of equipment.” He indicated Anderson and MacDowell. “What about the rest of them? What’s the need of them?”

“I want people here who can ask the right questions,” Courtland explained. “We won’t get answers any other way. The man, if he shows up at all, will stay only a finite time. During that time, we’ve got to find out —-” He broke off as his wife came up beside him. “What is it?”

“The boys want to watch,” Fay explained. “Can they? They promise they won’t make any noise.” She added wistfully, “I’d sort of like to watch, too.”

“Watch, then,” Courtland answered gloomily. “Maybe there won’t be anything to see.”

While Fay served coffee around, Courtland went on with his explanation. “First of all, we want to find out if this man is on the level. Our first questions will be aimed at tripping him up; I want these specialists to go to work on him. If he’s a fake, they’ll probably find it out.”

“And if he isn’t?” Anderson asked, an interested expression on his face. “If he isn’t, you’re saying…”

“If he isn’t, then he’s from the next decade, and I want him pumped for all he’s worth. But —” Courtland paused. “I doubt if we’ll get much theory. I had the impression that he’s a long way down on the totem pole. The best we probably can do is get a rundown on his specific work. From that, we may have to assemble our picture, make our own extrapolations.”

“You think he can tell us what he does for a living,” Pesbroke said cannily, “but that’s about it.”

“We’ll be lucky if he shows up at all,” Courtland said. He settled down on the couch and began methodically knocking his pipe against the ashtray. “All we can do is wait. Each of you think over what you’re going to ask. Try to figure out the questions you want answered by a man from the future who doesn’t know he’s from the future, who’s trying to repair equipment that doesn’t yet exist.”

“I’m scared,” the legal stenographer said, white-faced and wide-eyed, her coffee cup trembling.

“I’m about fed up,” Hurley muttered, eyes fixed sullenly on the floor. “This is all a lot of hot air.”

It was just about that time that the swibble repairman came again, and once more timidly knocked on the hall door.

The young repairman was flustered. And he was getting perturbed. “I’m sorry, sir,” he began without preamble. “I can see you have company, but I’ve rechecked my route instructions and this is *absolutely* the right address.” He added plaintively, “I tried some other apartments; nobody knew what I was talking about.”

“Come in,” Courtland managed. He stepped aside, got himself between the swibble repairman and the door, and ushered him into the living room.

“Is this the person?” Pesbroke rumbled doubtfully, his gray eyes narrowing.

Courtland ignored him. “Sit down,” he ordered the swibble repairman. Out of the corner of his eye he could see Anderson and Hurley and MacDowell moving in closely; Parkinson threw down his *Fortune* and got quickly to his feet. In the kitchen, the sound of tape running through the recording head was audible … the room had begun moving into activity.

“I could come some other time,” the repairman said apprehensively, eyeing the closing circle of people. “I don’t want to bother you, sir, when you have guests.”

Perched grimly on the arm of the couch, Courtland said, “This is as good a time as any. In fact, this is the best time.” A wild flood of relief spilled over him: now they had a chance. “I don’t know what got into me,” he went on rapidly. “I was confused. Of course I have a swibble; it’s set up in the dining room.”

The repairman’s face twitched with a spasm of laughter. “Oh, really,” he choked. “In the dining room? That’s about the funniest joke I’ve heard in weeks.”

Courtland glanced at Pesbroke. What the hell was so funny about that? Then his flesh began to crawl; cold sweat broke out on his forehead and the palms of his hands. What the hell was a swibble? Maybe they had better find out right away — or not at all. Maybe they were getting into something deeper than they knew. Maybe — and he didn't like the thought — they were better off where they were.

"I was confused," he said, "by your nomenclature. I don't think of it as a swibble." Cautiously, he finished, "I know that's the popular jargon, but with that much money involved, I like to think of it by its legitimate title."

The swibble repairman looked completely confused; Courtland realized that he had made another mistake; apparently *swibble* was its correct name.

Pesbroke spoke up. "How long have you been repairing swibbles, Mr… ." He waited, but there was no response from the thin, blank face. "What's your name, young man?" he demanded.

"My *what?"* The swibble repairman pulled jerkily away. "I don't understand you, sir."

Good Lord, Courtland thought. It was going to be a lot harder than he had realized — than any of them had realized.

Angrily, Pesbroke said, "You must have a name. Everybody has a name."

The young repairman gulped and stared down red-faced at the carpet. "I'm still only in service group four, sir. So I don't have a name yet."

"Let it go," Courtland said. What kind of a society gave out names as a status privilege? "I want to make sure you're a competent repairman," he explained. "How long have you been repairing swibbles?"

“For six years and three months,” the repairman asserted. Pride took the place of embarrassment. “In junior high school I showed a straight-A record in swibble-maintenance aptitude.” His meager chest swelled. “I’m a born swibble-man,”

“Fine,” Courtland agreed uneasily; he couldn’t believe the industry was that big. They gave tests in junior high school? Was swibble maintenance considered a basic talent, like symbol manipulation and manual dexterity? Had swibble work become as fundamental as musical talent, or as the ability to conceive spatial relationships?

“Well,” the repairman said briskly, gathering up his bulging tool kit, “I’m all ready to get started. I have to be back at the shop before long… I’ve got a lot of other calls.”

Bluntly, Pesbroke stepped up squarely in front of the thin young man. “What is a swibble?” he demanded. “I’m tired of this damn fooling around. You say you work on these things — *what are they?* That’s a simple enough question; they must be something.”

“Why,” the young man said hesitantly, “I mean, that’s hard to say. Suppose — well, suppose you ask me what a cat or a dog is. How can I answer that?’

“We’re getting nowhere,” Anderson spoke up. “The swibble is manufactured, isn’t it? You must have schematics, then; hand them over.”

The young repairman gripped his tool kit defensively. “What in the world is the matter, sir? If this is your idea of a joke — ” He turned back to Courtland. “I’d like to start work; I really don’t have much time.”

Standing in the corner, hands shoved deep in his pockets, MacDowell said slowly, “I’ve been thinking about getting a swibble. The missus thinks we ought to have one.”

“Oh, certainly,” the repairman agreed. Color rising in his cheeks, he rushed on, “I’m surprised you don’t have a swibble already; in fact, I can’t imagine what’s wrong with you people. You’re all acting — oddly. Where, if I may ask, do you come from? Why are you so — well, so uninformed?”

“These people,” Courtland explained, “come from a part of the country where there aren’t any swibbles.”

Instantly, the repairman’s face hardened with suspicion. “Oh?” he said sharply. “Interesting. What part of the country is that?”

Again, Courtland had said the wrong thing; he knew that. While he floundered for a response, MacDowell cleared his throat and inexorably went on. “Anyhow,” he said, “we’ve been meaning to get one. You have any folders with you? Pictures of different models?”

The repairman responded. “I’m afraid not, sir. But if you’ll give me your address I’ll have the sales department send you information. And if you want, a qualified representative can call on you at your convenience and describe the advantages of owning a swibble.”

“The first swibble was developed in 1963?” Hurley asked.

“That’s right.” The repairman’s suspicions had momentarily lulled. “And just in time, too. Let me say this — if Wright hadn’t got his first model going, there wouldn’t be any human beings left alive. You people here who don’t own swibbles — you may not know it — and you certainly act as if you didn’t know it — but you’re alive right now because of old R.J. Wright. It’s swibbles that keep the world going.”

Opening his black case, the repairman briskly brought out a complicated apparatus of tubes and wiring. He filled a drum with clear fluid, sealed it, tried the plunger, and straightened up. “I’ll start out with a shot of dx — that usually puts them back into operation.”

“What is dx?” Anderson asked quickly.

Surprised at the question, the repairman answered, “It’s a high-protein food concentrate. We’ve found that ninety per cent of our early service calls are the result of improper diet. People just don’t know how to care for their new swibble.”

“My God,” Anderson said feebly. “It’s alive.”

Courtland’s mind took a nose dive. He had been wrong; it wasn’t precisely a repairman who had stood gathering his equipment together. The man had come to fix the swibble, all right, but his capacity was slightly different than Courtland had supposed. He wasn’t a repairman; he was a veterinarian.

Laying out instruments and meters, the young man explained: “The new swibbles are a lot more complex than the early models; I need all this before I can even get started. But blame the War.”

“The War?” Fay Courtland echoed apprehensively.

“Not the early war. The big one, in ‘75. That little war in ‘61 wasn’t really much. You know, I suppose, that Wright was originally an Army engineer, stationed over in — well, I guess it was called Europe. I believe the idea came to him because of all those refugees pouring across the border. Yes, I’m sure that’s how it was. During that little war, back in ‘61, they came across by the millions. And they went the other way, too. My goodness, people were shifting back and forth between the two camps — it was revolting.”

“I’m not clear on my history,” Courtland said thickly. “I never paid much attention in school… the ‘61 war, that was between Russia and America?”

“Oh,” the repairman said, “it was between everybody. Russia headed the Eastern side, of course. And America the West. But everybody was in it. That was the little war, though; that didn’t count.”

“Little?” Fay demanded, horrified.

“Well,” the repairman admitted, “I suppose it looked like a lot at the time. But I mean, there were buildings still standing, afterward. And it only lasted a few months.”

“Who — won?” Anderson croaked.

The repairman tittered. “Won? What an odd question. Well, there were more people left in the Eastern bloc, if that’s what you mean. Anyhow, the importance of the ‘61 war — and I’m *sure* your history teachers made that clear — was that swibbles appeared. R.J. Wright got his idea from the camp-changers that appeared in that war. So by ‘75, when the *real* war came along, we had plenty of swibbles.” Thoughtfully, he added, “In fact, I’d say the real war was a war over swibbles. I mean, it was the last war. It was the war between the people who wanted swibbles and those who didn’t.” Complacently, he finished, “Needless to say, *we* won.”

After a time Courtland managed to ask, “What happened to the others? Those who — didn’t want swibbles.”

“Why,” the repairman said gently, “the swibbles got them.”

Shakily, Courtland started his pipe going. “I didn’t know about that.”

“What do you mean?” Pesbroke demanded hoarsely. “How did they get them? What did they do?”

Astonished, the repairman shook his head. “I didn’t know there was such ignorance in lay circles.” The position of pundit obviously pleased

him; sticking out his bony chest, he proceeded to lecture the circle of intent faces on the fundamentals of history. “Wright’s first A-driven swibble was crude, of course. But it served its purpose. Originally, it was able to differentiate the camp-shifters into two groups: those who had really seen the light, and those who were insincere. Those who were going to shift back… who weren’t really loyal. The authorities wanted to know which of the shifters had really come over to the West and which were spies and secret agents. That was the original swibble function. But that was nothing compared to now.”

“No,” Courtland agreed, paralyzed. “Nothing at all.”

“Now,” the repairman said sleekly, “we don’t deal with such crudities. It’s absurd to wait until an individual has accepted a contrary ideology, and then hope he’ll shift away from it. In a way, it’s ironic, isn’t it? After the ‘61 war there was really only one contrary ideology: those who opposed the swibbles.”

He laughed happily. “So the swibbles differentiated those who didn’t want to be differentiated by swibbles. My, that was quite a war. Because that wasn’t a messy war, with a lot of bombs and jellied gasoline. That was a *scientific* war — none of that random pulverizing. That was just swibbles going down into cellars and ruins and hiding places and digging out those Contrapersons one by one. Until we had all of them. So now,” he finished, gathering up his equipment, “we don’t have to worry about wars or anything of that sort. There won’t be any more conflicts, because we don’t have any contrary ideologies. As Wright showed, it doesn’t really matter what ideology we have; it isn’t important whether it’s Communism or Free Enterprise or Socialism or Fascism or Slavery. What’s important is that every one of us agrees completely; that we’re all absolutely loyal. And as long as we have our swibbles —” He winked knowingly at Courtland. “Well, as a new swibble owner, you’ve found out the advantages. You know the sense of security and satisfaction in being *certain* that your ideology is exactly congruent with that of everybody else in the world. That there’s no possibility, no chance whatsoever that you’ll go astray — and that some passing swibble will feed on you.”

It was MacDowell who managed to pull himself together first. “Yeah,” he said ironically. “It certainly sounds like what the missus and I want.”

“Oh, you ought to have a swibble of your own,” the repairman urged. “Consider — if you have your own swibble, it’ll adjust you automatically. It’ll keep you on the right track without strain or fuss. You’ll always know you’re not going wrong — remember the swibble slogan: Why be *half* loyal? With your own swibble, your outlook will be corrected by painless degrees … but if you wait, if you just *hope* you’re on the right track, why, one of these days you may walk into a friend’s living room and his swibble may just simply crack you open and drink you down. Of course,” he reflected, “a passing swibble may still get you in time to straighten you out. But usually it’s too late. Usually —” He smiled. “Usually people go beyond redemption, once they get started.”

“And your job,” Pesbroke muttered, “is to keep the swibbles working?”

“They do get out of adjustment, left to themselves.”

“Isn’t it a kind of paradox?” Pesbroke pursued. “The swibbles keep us in adjustment, and we keep them in adjustment… it’s a closed circle.”

The repairman was intrigued. “Yes, that’s an interesting way of putting it. But we must keep control over the swibbles, of course. So they don’t die.” He shivered. “Or worse.”

“Die?” Hurley said, still not understanding. “But if they’re built —” Wrinkling his brows he said, “Either they’re machines or they’re alive. Which is it?”

Patiently, the repairman explained elementary physics. “Swibble-culture is an organic phenotype evolved in a protein medium under controlled conditions. The directing neurological tissue that forms the basis of the swibble is alive, certainly, in the sense that it grows, thinks, feeds, excretes waste. Yes, it’s definitely alive. But the swibble, as a functioning whole, is a

manufactured item. The organic tissue is inserted in the master tank and then sealed. I certainly don't repair *that;* I give it nutriments to restore a proper balance of diet, and I try to deal with parasitic organisms that find their way into it. I try to keep it adjusted and healthy. The balance of the organism, is, of course, totally mechanical."

"The swibble has direct access to human minds?" Anderson asked, fascinated.

"Naturally. It's an artificially evolved telepathic metazoan. And with it, Wright solved the basic problem of modern times: the existence of diverse, warring ideological factions, the presence of disloyalty and dissent. In the words of General Steiner's famous aphorism: War is an extension of the disagreement from the voting booth to the battlefield. And the preamble of the World Service Charter: war, if it is to be eliminated, must be eliminated from the minds of men, for it is in the minds of men that disagreement begins. Up until 1963, we had no way to get into the minds of men. Up until 1963, the problem was unsolvable."

"Thank God," Fay said clearly.

The repairman failed to hear her; he was carried away by his own enthusiasm. "By means of the swibble, we've managed to transform the basic sociological problem of loyalty into a routine technical matter: to the mere matter of maintenance and repair. Our only concern is keep the swibbles functioning correctly; the rest is up to them."

"In other words," Courtland said faintly, "you repairmen are the only controlling influence over the swibbles. You represent the total human agency standing above these machines."

The repairman reflected. "I suppose so," he admitted modestly. "Yes, that's correct."

"Except for you, they pretty damn well manage the human race."

The bony chest swelled with complacent, confident pride. “I suppose you could say that.”

“Look,” Courtland said thickly. He grabbed hold of the man’s arm. “How the hell can you be sure? Are you really in control?” A crazy hope was rising up inside him: as long as men had power over the swibbles there was a chance to roll things back. The swibbles could be disassembled, taken apart piece by piece. As long as swibbles had to submit to human servicing it wasn’t quite hopeless.

“What, sir?” the repairman inquired. “Of course we’re in control. Don’t you worry.” Firmly, he disengaged Courtland’s fingers. “Now, where is your swibble?” He glanced around the room. “I’ll have to hurry; there isn’t much time left.”

“I haven’t got a swibble,” Courtland said.

For a moment it didn’t register. Then a strange, intricate expression crossed the repairman’s face. “No swibble? But you told me —”

“Something went wrong,” Courtland said hoarsely. “There aren’t any swibbles. It’s too early — they haven’t been invented. Understand? You came too soon!”

The young man’s eyes popped. Clutching his equipment, he stumbled back two steps, blinked, opened his mouth and tried to speak. “Too — soon?” The comprehension arrived. Suddenly he looked older, much older. “I wondered. All the undamaged buildings… the archaic furnishings. The transmission machinery must have misphased!” Rage flashed over him. “That instantaneous service — I knew dispatch should have stuck to the old mechanical system. I told them to make better tests. Lord, there’s going to be hell to pay; if we ever get this mix-up straightened out I’ll be surprised.”

Bending down furiously, he hastily dropped his equipment back in the case. In a single motion he slammed and locked it, straightened up, bowed

briefly at Courtland.

“Good evening,” he said frigidly. And vanished.

The circle of watchers had nothing to watch. The swibble repairman had gone back to where he came from.

After a time Pesbroke turned and signaled to the man in the kitchen. “Might as well shut off the tape recorder,” he muttered bleakly. “There’s nothing more to record.”

“Good Lord,” Hurley said, shaken. “A world run by machines.”

Fay shivered. “I couldn’t believe that little fellow had so much power; I thought he was just a minor official.”

“He’s completely in charge,” Courtland said harshly.

There was silence.

One of the two children yawned sleepily. Fay turned abruptly to them and herded them efficiently into the bedroom. “Time for you two to be in bed,” she commanded, with false gaiety.

Protesting sullenly, the two boys disappeared, and the door closed. Gradually, the living room broke into motion. The tape-recorder man began rewinding his reel. The legal stenographer shakily collected her notes and put away her pencils. Hurley lit up a cigar and stood puffing moodily, his face dark and somber.

“I suppose,” Courtland said finally, “that we’ve all accepted it; we assume it’s not a fake.”

“Well,” Pesbroke pointed out, “he vanished. That ought to be proof enough. And all the junk he took out of his kit —”

“It’s only nine years,” Parkinson, the electrician, said thoughtfully. “Wright must be alive already. Let’s look him up and stick a shiv into him.”

“Army engineer,” MacDowell agreed. “R.J. Wright. It ought to be possible to locate him. Maybe we can keep it from happening.”

“How long would you guess people like him can keep the swibbles under control?” Anderson asked.

Courtland shrugged wearily. “No telling. Maybe years … maybe a century. But sooner or later something’s going to come up, something they didn’t expect. And then it’ll be predatory machinery preying on all of us.”

Fay shuddered violently. “It sounds awful; I’m certainly glad it won’t be for a while.”

“You and the repairman,” Courtland said bitterly. “As long as it doesn’t affect you —”

Fay’s overwrought nerves flared up. “We’ll discuss it later on.” She smiled jerkily at Pesbroke. “More coffee? I’ll put some on.” Turning on her heel, she rushed from the living room into the kitchen.

While she was filling the Silex with water, the doorbell quietly rang.

The roomful of people froze. They looked at each other, mute and horrified.

“He’s back,” Hurley said thickly.

“Maybe it’s not him,” Anderson suggested weakly. “Maybe it’s the camera people, finally.”

But none of them moved toward the door. After a time the bell rang again, longer, and more insistently.

"We have to answer it," Pesbroke said woodenly.

"Not me," the legal stenographer quavered.

"This isn't my apartment," MacDowell pointed out.

Courtland moved rigidly toward the door. Even before he took hold of the knob he knew what it was. Dispatch, using its new-fangled instantaneous transmission. Something to get work crews and repairmen directly to their stations. So control of the swibbles would be absolute and perfect; so nothing would go wrong.

But something had gone wrong. The control had fouled itself up. It was working upside down, completely backward. Self-defeating, futile: it was too perfect. Gripping the knob, he tore the door open.

Standing in the hall were four men. They wore plain gray uniforms and caps. The first of them whipped off his cap, glanced at a written sheet of paper, and then nodded politely at Courtland.

"Evening, sir," he said cheerfully. He was a husky man, wide-shouldered, with a shock of thick brown hair hanging over his sweat-shiny forehead. "We — uh — got a little lost, I guess. Took a while to get here."

Peering into the apartment, he hitched up his heavy leather belt, stuffed his route sheet into his pocket, and rubbed his large, competent hands together.

"It's downstairs in the trunk," he announced, addressing Courtland and the whole living room of people. "Tell me where you want it, and we'll bring it right up. We should have a good-sized space — that side over there

by the window should do.” Turning away, he and his crew moved energetically toward the service elevator. “These late-model swibbles take up a lot of room.”

Captive Market

Saturday morning, about eleven o’clock, Mrs. Edna Berthelson was ready to make her little trip. Although it was a weekly affair, consuming four hours of her valuable business time, she made the profitable trip alone, preserving for herself the integrity of her find.

Because that was what it was. A find, a stroke of incredible luck. There was nothing else like it, and she had been in business fifty-three years. More, if the years in her father’s store were counted — but they didn’t really count. That had been for the experience (her father made that clear); no pay was involved. But it gave her the understanding of business, the feel of operating a small country store, dusting pencils and unwrapping flypaper and serving up dried beans and chasing the cat out of the cracker barrel where he liked to sleep.

Now the store was old, and so was she. The big, heavyset, black browed man who was her father had died long ago; her own children and grandchildren had been spawned, had crept out over the world, were everywhere. One by one they had appeared, lived in Walnut Creek, sweated through the dry, sun-baked summers, and then gone on, leaving one by one as they had come. She and the store sagged and settled a little more each year, became a little more frail and stern and grim. A little more themselves.

That morning very early Jackie said: “Grandmaw, where are you going?” Although he knew, of course, where she was going. She was going out in her truck as she always did; this was the Saturday trip. But he liked to ask; he was pleased by the stability of the answer. He liked having it always the same.

To another question there was another unvarying answer, but this one didn’t please him so much. It came in answer to the question.“Can I come along?”

The answer to that was always no.

Edna Berthelson laboriously carried packages and boxes from the back of the store to the rusty, upright pickup truck. Dust lay over the truck; its red-metal sides were bent and corroded. The motor was already on; it was wheezing and heating up in the midday sun. A few drab chickens pecked in the dust around its wheels. Under the porch of the store a plump white shaggy sheep squatted, its face vapid, indolent, indifferently watching the activity of the day. Cars and trucks rolled along Mount Diablo Boulevard. Along Lafayette Avenue a few shoppers strolled, farmers and their wives, petty businessmen, farmhands, some city women in their gaudy slacks and print shirts, sandals, bandannas. In the front of the store the radio tinnily played popular songs.

“I asked you a question,” Jackie said righteously. “I asked you where you’re going.”

Mrs. Berthelson bent stiffly over to lift the last armload of boxes. Most of the loading had been done the night before by Arnie the Swede, the hulking, white-haired hired man who did the heavy work around the store. “What?” she murmured vaguely, her gray, wrinkled face twisting with concentration. “You know perfectly well where I’m going. “

Jackie trailed plaintively after her, as she reentered the store to look for her order book. “Can I come? Please, can I come along? You never let me come —you never let anybody come. “

“Of course not,” Mrs. Berthelson said sharply. “It’s nobody’s business. “

“But I want to come along,” Jackie explained.

Slyly, the little old woman turned her gray head and peered back at him, a worn, colorless bird taking in a world perfectly understood. “So does everybody else.” Thin lips twitching in a secret smile, Mrs. Berthelson said softly: “But nobody can.”

Jackie didn’t like the sound of that. Sullenly, he retired to a comer, hands stuck deep in the pockets of his jeans, not taking part in something that was denied him, not approving of something in which he could not share. Mrs. Berthelson ignored him. She pulled her frayed blue sweater around her thin shoulders, located her sunglasses, pulled the screen door shut after her, and strode briskly to the truck.

Getting the truck into gear was an intricate process. For a time she sat tugging crossly at the shift, pumping the clutch up and down, waiting impatiently for the teeth to fall into place. At last, screeching and chattering, the gears meshed; the truck leaped a little, and Mrs. Berthelson gunned the motor and released the hand brake.

As the truck roared jerkily down the driveway, Jackie detached himself from the shade by the house and followed along after it. His mother was nowhere in sight. Only the dozing sheep and the two scratching chickens were visible. Even Arnie the Swede was gone, probably getting a cold Coke. Now was a fine time. Now was the best time he had ever had. And it was going to be sooner or later anyhow, because he was determined to come along.

Grabbing hold of the tailboard of the truck, Jackie hoisted himself up and landed facedown on the tightly packed heaps of packages and boxes. Under him the truck bounced and bumped. Jackie hung on for dear life; clutching at the boxes he pulled his legs under him, crouched down, and desperately sought to keep from being flung off. Gradually, the truck righted itself, and the torque diminished. He breathed a sigh of relief and settled gratefully down.

He was on his way. He was along, finally. Accompanying Mrs. Berthelson on her secret weekly trip, her strange covert enterprise from which — he had heard — she made a fabulous profit. A trip which nobody understood, and which he knew, in the deep recesses of his child’s mind, was something awesome and wonderful, something that would be well worth the trouble.

He had hoped fervently that she wouldn’t stop to check her load along the way.

With infinite care, Tellman prepared himself a cup of “coffee”. First, he carried a tin cup of roasted grain over to the gasoline drum the colony used as a mixing bowl. Dumping it in, he hurried to add a handful of chicory and a few fragments of dried bran. Dirt-stained hands trembling, he managed to get a fire started among the ashes and coals under the pitted metal grate. He set a pan of tepid water on the flames and searched for a spoon.

“What are you up to?” his wife demanded from behind him.

“Uh,” Tellman muttered. Nervously, he edged between Gladys and the meal. “Just fooling around.” In spite of himself, his voice took on a nagging whine. “I have a right to fix myself something, don’t I? As much right as anybody else.”

“You ought to be over helping.”

“I was. I wrenched something in my back.” The wiry, middle-aged man ducked uneasily away from his wife; tugging at the remains of his soiled white shirt, he retreated toward the door of the shack. “Damn it, a person has to rest, sometimes.”

“Rest when we get there.” Gladys wearily brushed back her thick, dark-blonde hair. “Suppose everybody was like you.”

Tellman flushed resentfully. “Who plotted our trajectory? Who’s done all the navigation work?”

A faint ironic smile touched his wife’s chapped lips. “We’ll see how your charts work out,” she said. “Then we’ll talk about it.”

Enraged, Tellman plunged out of the shack, into the blinding late afternoon sunlight.

He hated the sun, the sterile white glare that began at five in the morning and lasted until nine in the evening. The Big Blast had sizzled the water vapor from the air; the sun beat down pitilessly, sparing nobody. But there were few left to care.

To his right was the cluster of shacks that made up the camp. An eclectic hodgepodge of boards, sheets of tin, wire and tar paper, upright concrete blocks, anything and everything dragged from the San Francisco ruins, forty miles west. Cloth blankets flapped dismally in doorways, protection against the vast hosts of insects that swept across the campsite from time to time. Birds, the natural enemy of insects, were gone. Tellman hadn't seen a bird in two years — and he didn't expect to see one again. Beyond the camp began the eternal dead black ash, the charred face of the world, without features, without life.

The camp had been set up in a natural hollow. One side was sheltered by the tumbled ruins of what had once been a minor mountain range. The concussion of the blast had burst the towering cliffs; rock had cascaded into the valley for days. After San Francisco had been fired out of existence, survivors had crept into the heaps of boulders, looking for a place to hide from the sun. That was the hardest part: the unshielded sun. Not the insects, not the radioactive clouds of ash, not the flashing white fury of the blasts, but the sun. More people had died of thirst and dehydration and blind insanity than from toxic poisons.

From his breast pocket, Tellman got a precious package of cigarettes. Shakily, he lit up. His thin, clawlike hands were trembling, partly from fatigue, partly from rage and tension. How he hated the camp. He loathed everybody in it, his wife included. Were they worth saving? He doubted it. Most of them were barbarians, already; what did it matter if they got the ship off or not? He was sweating away his mind and life, trying to save them. The hell with them.

But then, his own safety was involved with theirs.

He stalked stiff-legged over to where Barnes and Masterson stood talking. “How’s it coming?” he demanded gruffly.

“Fine,” Barnes answered. “It won’t he long, now.”

“One more load,” Masterson said. His heavy features twitched uneasily. “I hope nothing gets fouled up. She ought to be here any minute. “

Tellman loathed the sweaty, animal-like scent that rolled from Masterson’s beefy body. Their situation wasn’t an excuse to creep around filthy as a pig … on Venus, things would be different. Masterson was useful, now; he was an experienced mechanic, invaluable in servicing the turbine and jets of the ship. But when the ship had landed and been pillaged …

Satisfied, Tellman brooded over the reestablishment of the rightful order. The hierarchy had collapsed in the ruins of the cities, but it would be back strong as ever. Take Flannery, for example. Flannery was nothing but a foul-mouthed, shanty-Irish stevedore … but he was in charge of loading the ship, the greatest job at the moment. Flannery was top dog, for the time being … but that would change.

It had to change. Consoled, Tellman strolled away from Barnes and Masterson, over to the ship itself.

The ship was huge. Across its muzzle the stenciled identification still remained, not yet totally obliterated by drifting ash and the searing heat of the sun.

U.S. ARMY ORDNANCE

SERIES A-3 (B)

Originally, it had been a high-velocity “massive retaliation” weapon, loaded with an H-warhead, ready to carry indiscriminate death to the enemy. The projectile had never been launched. Soviet toxic crystals had blown quietly into the windows and doors of the local command barracks. When launching day arrived, there was no crew to send it off. But it didn’t matter — there was no enemy, either. The rocket had stood on its buttocks for months … it was still there when the first refugees straggled into the shelter of the demolished mountains.

“Nice, isn’t it?” Patricia Shelby said. She glanced up from her work and smiled blearily at Tellman. Her small, pretty face was streaked with fatigue and eyestrain. “Sort of like the trylon at the New York World’s Fair.”

“My God,” Tellman said, “you remember that?”

“I was only eight,” Patricia answered. In the shadow of the ship she was carefully checking the automatic relays that would maintain the air, temperature, and humidity of the ship. “But I’ll never forget it. Maybe I was a precog — when I saw it sticking up I knew someday it would mean a lot to everybody. “

“A lot to the twenty of us,” Tellman corrected. Suddenly he offered her the remains of his cigarette. “Here — you look like you could use it.”

“Thanks.” Patricia continued with her work, the cigarette between her lips. “I’m almost done — Boy, some of these relays are tiny. Just think.” She held up a microscopic wafer of transparent plastic. “While we’re all out cold, this makes the difference between life and death.” A strange, awed look crept into her dark-blue eyes. “To the human race.”

Tellman guffawed. “You and Flannery. He’s always spouting idealistic twaddle.”

Professor John Crowley, once head of the history department at Stanford, now the nominal leader of the colony, sat with Flannery and Jean

Dobbs, examining the suppurating arm of a ten-year-old boy. “Radiation,” Crowley was saying emphatically. “The overall level is rising daily. It’s settling ash that does it. If we don’t get out soon, we’re done.”

“It’s not radiation,” Flannery corrected in his ultimately certain voice. “It’s toxic crystalline poisoning; that stuff’s knee-deep up in the hills. He’s been playing around up there.”

“Is that so?” Jean Dobbs demanded. The boy nodded his head not daring to look at her. “You’re right,” she said to Flannery.

“Put some salve on it,” Flannery said. “And hope he’ll live. Outside of sulfathiazole there’s not much we have.” He glanced at his watch, suddenly tense. “Unless she brings the penicillin, today.”

“If she doesn’t bring it today,” Crowley said, “she’ll never bring it. This is the last load; as soon as it’s stored, we’re taking off.”

Rubbing his hands, Flannery suddenly bellowed: “Then get out the money!”

Crowley grinned. “Right.” He fumbled in one of the steel storage lockers and yanked out a handful of paper bills. Holding a sheaf of bills up to Tellman he fanned them out invitingly. “Take your pick. Take them all.”

Nervously, Tellman said, “Be careful with that. She’s probably raised the price on everything, again.”

“We’ve got plenty.” Flannery took some and stuffed it into a partly filled load being wheeled by, on its way to the ship. “There’s money blowing all over the world, along with the ash and particles of bone. On Venus we won’t need it — she might as well have it all.”

On Venus, Tellman thought, savagely, things would revert to their legitimate order — with Flannery digging sewers where he belonged.

“What’s she bringing mostly?” he asked Crowley and Jean Dobbs, ignoring Flannery. “What’s the last load made up of?”

“Comic books,” Flannery said dreamily, wiping perspiration from his balding forehead; he was a lean, tall, dark-haired young man. “And harmonicas.”

Crowley winked at him. “Uke picks, so we can lie in our hammocks all day, strumming ‘Someone’s in the Kitchen with Dinah.’ “

“And swizzle sticks,” Flannery reminded him. “In order that we may all the more properly flatten the bubbles of our vintage ‘38 champagne.”

Tellman boiled. “You degenerate!”

Crowley and Flannery roared with laughter, and Tellman stalked off, smoldering under this new humiliation. What kind of morons and lunatics were they? Joking at a time like this … He peered miserably, almost accusingly, at the ship. Was this the kind of world they were going to found?

In the pitiless white-hot sun, the huge ship shimmered and glowed. A vast upright tube of alloy and protective fiber mesh rising up above the tumble of wretched shacks. One more load, and they were off. One more truckful of supplies from their only source, the meager trickle of uncontaminated goods that meant the difference between life and death.

Praying that nothing would go wrong, Tellman turned to await the arrival of Mrs. Edna Berthelson and her battered red pickup truck. Their fragile umbilical cord, connecting them with the opulent, undamaged past.

On both sides of the road lay groves of lush apricot trees. Bees and flies buzzed sleepily among the rotting fruit scattered over the soil; every now and then a roadside stand appeared, operated by somnambulistic children. In driveways stood parked Buicks and Oldsmobiles. Rural dogs wandered

here and there. At one intersection stood a swank tavern, its neon sign blinking on and off, ghostly pale in the midmorning sun.

Mrs. Edna Berthelson glared hostilely at the tavern, and at the cars parked around it. City people were moving out into the valley, cutting down the old oak trees, the ancient fruit orchards, setting up suburban homes, stopping in the middle of the day for a whiskey sour and then driving cheerfully on. Driving at seventy-five miles an hour in their swept-back Chryslers. A column of cars that had piled up behind her truck suddenly burst forth and swung past her. She let them go, stony-faced, indifferent. Served them right for being in such a hurry. If she always hurried like that, she would never have had time to pay attention to that odd ability she had found in her introspective, lonely drives; never have discovered that she could look “ahead,” never have discovered that hole in the warp of time which enabled her to trade so easily at her own exorbitant prices. Let them hurry if they wanted. The heavy load in the back of the truck jogged rhythmically. The motor wheezed. Against the back window a half-dead fly buzzed.

Jackie lay stretched out among the cartons and boxes, enjoying the ride, gazing complacently at the apricot trees and cars. Against the hot sky the peak of Mount Diablo rose, blue and white, an expanse of cold rock. Trails of mist clung to the peak; Mount Diablo went a long way up. He made a face at a dog standing indolently at the side of the road, waiting to cross. He waved gaily at a Pacific Telephone Co. repairman, stringing wire from a huge reel.

Abruptly the truck turned off the state highway and onto a black surfaced side road. Now there were fewer cars. The truck began to climb … the rich orchards fell behind and gave way to flat brown fields. A dilapidated farmhouse lay to the right; he watched it with interest, wondering how old it was. When it was out of sight, no other man-made structures followed. The fields became unkempt. Broken, sagging fences were visible occasionally. Tom signs, no longer legible. The truck was approaching the base of Mount Diablo … almost nobody came this way.

Idly, the boy wondered why Mrs. Berthelson's little trip took her in this direction. Nobody lived here; suddenly there were no fields, only scrub grass and bushes, wild countryside, the tumbled slope of the mountain. A rabbit hopped skillfully across the half-decayed road. Rolling hills, a broad expanse of trees and strewn boulders … there was nothing here but a state fire tower, and maybe a watershed. And an abandoned picnic area, once maintained by the state, now forgotten.

An edge of fear touched the boy. No customers lived out this way … he had been positive the battered red pickup truck would head directly into town, take him and the load to San Francisco or Oakland or Berkeley, a city where he could get out and run around, see interesting sights. There was nothing here, only abandoned emptiness, silent and foreboding. In the shadow of the mountain, the air was chill. He shivered. All at once he wished he hadn't come.

Mrs. Berthelson slowed the truck and shifted noisily into low. With a roar and an explosive belch of exhaust gases, the truck crept up a steep ascent, among jagged boulders, ominous and sharp. Somewhere far off a bird cried shrilly; Jackie listened to its thin sounds echoing dismally away and wondered how he could attract his grandmother's attention. It would be nice to be in front, in the cabin. It would be nice —

And then he noticed it. At first he didn't believe it … but he had to believe it.

Under him, the truck was beginning to fade away.

It faded slowly, almost imperceptibly. Dimmer and dimmer the truck grew; its rusty red sides became gray, then colorless. The black road was visible underneath. In wild panic, the boy clutched at the piles of boxes. His hands passed through them; he was riding precariously on an uneven sea of dim shapes, among almost invisible phantoms.

He lurched and slid down. Now — hideously — he was suspended momentarily halfway through the truck, just above the tail pipe. Groping desperately, he struggled to catch hold of the boxes directly above him.

“Help!” he shouted. His voice echoed around him; it was the only sound … the roar of the truck was fading. For a moment he clutched at the retreating shape of the truck; then, gently, gradually, the last image of the truck faded, and with a sickening crunch, the boy dropped to the road.

The impact sent him rolling into the dry weeds beyond the drainage ditch. Stunned, dazed with disbelief and pain, he lay gasping, trying feebly to pull himself up. There was only silence; the truck, Mrs. Berthelson, had vanished. He was totally alone. He closed his eyes and lay back, stupefied with fright.

Sometime later, probably not much later, he was aroused by the squeal of brakes. A dirty, orange state maintenance truck had lurched to a stop; two men in khaki work clothes were climbing down and hurrying over.

“What’s the matter?” one yelled at him. They grabbed him up, faces serious and alarmed. “What are you doing here?”

“Fell,” he muttered. “Off the truck.”

‘What truck?” they demanded. “How?”

He couldn’t tell them. All he knew was that Mrs. Berthelson had gone. He hadn’t made it, after all. Once again, she was making her trip alone. He would never know where she went; he would never find out who her customers were.

Gripping the steering wheel of the truck, Mrs. Berthelson was conscious that the transition had taken place. Vaguely, she was aware that the rolling brown fields, rocks and green scrub bushes had faded out. The first time she had gone “ahead” she had found the old truck floundering in a sea of black ash. She had been so excited by her discovery that day that she had neglected to “scan” conditions on the other side of the hole. She had known there were customers … and dashed headlong through the warp to get there first. She smiled complacently … she needn’t have hurried, there was no

competition here. In fact, the customers were so eager to deal with her, they had done virtually everything in their power to make things easier for her.

The men had built a crude strip of road out into the ash, a sort of wooden platform onto which the truck now rolled. She had learned the exact moment to “go ahead”; it was the instant that the truck passed the drainage culvert a quarter mile inside the state park. Here, “ahead,” the culvert also existed … but there was little left of it, only a vague jumble of shattered stone. And the road was utterly buried. Under the wheels of the truck the rough boards thumped and banged. It would be bad if she had a flat tire … but some of them could fix it. They were always working; one little additional task wouldn’t make much difference. She could see them, now; they stood at the end of the wooden platform, waiting impatiently for her. Beyond them was their jumble of crude, smelly shacks, and beyond that, their ship.

A lot she cared about their ship. She knew what it was: stolen army property. Setting her bony hand rigidly around the gearshift knob, she threw the truck into neutral and coasted to a stop. As the men approached, she began pulling on the hand brake.

“Afternoon,” Professor Crowley muttered, his eyes sharp and keen as he peered eagerly into the back of the truck.

Mrs. Berthelson grunted a noncommittal answer. She didn’t like any of them … dirty men, smelling of sweat and fear, their bodies and clothes streaked with grime, and the ancient coating of desperation that never seemed to leave them. Like awed, pitiful children they clustered around the truck, poking hopefully at the packages, already beginning to pluck them out onto the black ground.

“Here now,” she said sharply. “You leave those alone.”

Their hands darted back as if seared. Mrs. Berthelson sternly climbed from the truck, grabbed up her inventory sheet and plodded up to Crowley.

“You just wait,” she told him. “Those have to be checked off.”

He nodded, glanced at Masterson, licked his dry lips, and waited. They all waited. It had always been that way; they knew, and she knew, that there was no other way they could get their supplies. And if they didn’t get their supplies, their food and medicine and clothing and instruments and tools and raw materials, they wouldn’t be able to leave in their ship.

In this world, in the “ahead,” such things didn’t exist. At least, not so anybody could use them. A cursory glance had told her that; she could see the ruin with her own eyes. They hadn’t taken very good care of their world. They had wasted it all, turned it into black ash and ruin. Well, it was their business, not hers.

She had never been much interested in the relationship between their world and hers. She was content to know that both existed, and that she could go from one to the other and back. And she was the only one who knew how. Several times, people from this world, members of this group, had tried to go “back there” with her. It had always failed. As she made the transition, they were left behind. It was her power, her faculty. Not a shared faculty — she was glad of that. And for a person in business, quite a valuable faculty.

“All right,” she said crisply. Standing where she could keep her eye on them, she began checking off each box as it was carried from the truck. Her routine was exact and certain; it was part of her life. As long as she could remember she had transacted business in a distinct way. Her father had taught her how to live in a business world; she had learned his stem principles and rules. She was following them now.

Flannery and Patricia Shelby stood together at one side; Flannery held the money, payment for the delivery. “Well,” he said, under his breath, “now we can tell her to go leap in the river.”

“Are you sure?” Pat asked nervously.

“The last load’s here.” Flannery grinned starkly and ran a trembling hand through his thinning black hair. “Now we can get rolling. With this stuff, the ship’s crammed to the gills. We may even have to sit down and eat some of that now.” He indicated a bulging pasteboard carton of groceries. “Bacon, eggs, milk, real coffee. Maybe we won’t shove it in deep-freeze. Maybe we ought to have a last-meal-before-the-flight orgy.”

Wistfully, Pat said, “It would be nice. It’s been a long time since we’ve had food like that.”

Masterson strode over. “Let’s kill her and boil her in a big kettle. Skinny old witch — she might make good soup.”

“In the oven,” Flannery corrected. “Some gingerbread, to take along with us.”

“I wish you wouldn’t talk like that,” Pat said apprehensively. “She’s so — well, maybe she is a witch. I mean, maybe that’s what witches were … old women with strange talents. Like her — being able to pass through time.”

“Damn lucky for us,” Masterson said briefly.

“But she doesn’t understand it. Does she? Does she know what she’s doing? That she could save us all this by sharing her ability. Does she know what’s happened to our world?”

Flannery considered. “Probably she doesn’t know — or care. A mind like hers, business and profit-getting exorbitant rates from us, selling this stuff to us at an incredible premium. And the joke is that money’s worth nothing to us. If she could see, she’d know that. It’s just paper, in this world. But she’s caught in a narrow little routine. Business, profit.” He shook his head. “A mind like that, a warped, miserable flea-sized mind … and she has that unique talent.”

“But she can see,” Pat persisted. “She can see the ash, the ruin. How can she not know?”

Flannery shrugged. “She probably doesn’t connect it with her own life. After all, she’ll be dead in a couple of years … she won’t see the war in her real time. She’ll only see it this way, as a region into which she can travel. A sort of travelogue of strange lands. She can enter and leave — but we’re stuck. It must give you a damn fine sense of security to be able to walk out of one world into another. God, what I’d give to be able to go back with her.”

“It’s been tried,” Masterson pointed out. “That lizardhead Tellman tried it. And he came walking back, covered with ash. He said the truck faded out.”

“Of course it did,” Flannery said mildly. “She drove it back to Walnut Creek. Back to 1965. “

The unloading had been completed. The members of the colony were toiling up the slope, lugging the cartons to the check area beneath the ship. Mrs. Berthelson strode over to Flannery, accompanied by Professor Crowley.

“Here’s the inventory,” she said briskly. “A few items couldn’t be found. You know, I don’t stock all that in my store. I have to send out for most of it.”

“We know,” Flannery said, coldly amused. It would be interesting to see a country store that stocked binocular microscopes, turret lathes, frozen packs of antibiotics, high-frequency radio transmitters, advanced textbooks in all fields.

“So that’s why I have to charge you a little dearer,” the old woman continued, the inflexible routine of squeeze. “On items I bring in —” She examined her inventory, then returned the ten-page typewritten list that

Crowley had given her on the previous visit. “Some of these weren’t available. I marked them back order. That bunch of metals from those laboratories back East — they said maybe later.” A cunning look slid over the ancient gray eyes. “And they’ll be very expensive.”

“It doesn’t matter,” Flannery said, handing her the money. “You can cancel all the back orders.”

At first her face showed nothing. Only a vague inability to understand.

“No more shipments,” Crowley explained. A certain tension faded from them; for the first time, they weren’t afraid of her. The old relationship had ended. They weren’t dependent on the rusty red truck. They had their shipment; they were ready to leave.

“We’re taking off,” Flannery said, grinning starkly. “We’re full up. “

Comprehension came. “But I placed orders for those things.” Her voice was thin, bleak. Without emotion, “They’ll be shipped to me. I’ll have to pay for them.”

“Well,” Flannery said softly, “isn’t that too damn bad.”

Crowley shot him a warning glance. “Sorry,” he said to the old woman. “We can’t stick around — this place is getting hot. We’ve got to take off.”

On the withered face, dismay turned to growing wrath. “You ordered those things! You have to take them!” Her shrill voice rose to a screech of fury. “What am I supposed to do with them?”

As Flannery framed his bitter answer, Pat Shelby intervened. “Mrs. Berthelson,” she said quietly, “you’ve done a lot for us, even if you wouldn’t help us through the hole in your time. And we’re very grateful. If it wasn’t for you, we couldn’t have got together enough supplies. But we

really have to go.” She reached out her hand to touch the frail shoulder, but the old woman jerked furiously away. “I mean,” Pat finished awkwardly, “we can’t stay any longer, whether we want to or not. Do you see all that black ash? It’s radioactive, and more of it sifts down all the time. The toxic level is rising — if we stay any longer it’ll start destroying us.”

Mrs. Edna Berthelson stood clutching her inventory list. There was an expression on her face that none of the group had ever seen before. The violent spasm of wrath had vanished; now a cold, chill glaze lay over the aged features. Her eyes were like gray rocks, utterly without feeling.

Flannery wasn’t impressed. “Here’s your loot,” he said, thrusting out the handful of bills. “What the hell.” He turned to Crowley. “Let’s toss in the rest. Let’s stuff it down her goddamn throat.”

“Shut up,” Crowley snapped.

Flannery sank resentfully back. “Who are you talking to?”

“Enough’s enough.” Crowley, worried and tense, tried to speak to the old woman. “My God, you can’t expect us to stay around here forever, can you?”

There was no response. Abruptly, the old woman turned and strode silently back to her truck.

Masterson and Crowley looked uneasily at each other. “She sure is mad,” Masterson said apprehensively.

Tellman hurried up, glanced at the old woman getting into her truck, and then bent down to root around in one of the cartons of groceries. Childish greed flushed across his thin face. “Look,” he gasped. “Coffee — fifteen pounds of it. Can we open some? Can we get one tin open, to celebrate?”

“Sure,” Crowley said tonelessly, his eyes on the truck. With a muffled roar, the truck turned in a wide arc and rumbled off down the crude platform, toward the ash. It rolled off into the ash, slithered for a short distance, and then faded out. Only the bleak, sun-swept plain of darkness remained.

“Coffee!” Tellman shouted gleefully. He tossed the bright metal can high in the air and clumsily caught it again. “A celebration! Our last night — last meal on Earth!”

It was true.

As the red pickup truck jogged metallically along the road, Mrs Berthelson scanned “ahead” and saw that the men were telling the truth. Her thin lips writhed; in her mouth an acid taste of bile rose. She had taken it for granted that they would continue to buy — there was no competition, no other source of supply. But they were leaving. And when they left, there would be no more market.

She would never find a market that satisfactory. It was a perfect market; the group was a perfect customer. In the locked box at the back of the store, hidden down under the reserve sacks of grain, was almost two hundred and fifty thousand dollars. A fortune, taken in over the months, received from the imprisoned colony as it toiled to construct its ship.

And she had made it possible. She was responsible for letting them get away after all. Because of her shortsightedness, they were able to escape. She hadn’t used her head.

As she drove back to town she meditated calmly, rationally. It was totally because of her: she was the only one who had possessed the power to bring them their supplies. Without her, they were helpless.

Hopefully, she cast about, looking this way and that, peering with her deep inner sense, into the various “aheads.” There was more than one, of

course. The “aheads” lay like a pattern of squares, an intricate web of worlds into which she could step, if she cared. But all were empty of what she wanted.

All showed bleak plains of black ash, devoid of human habitation. What she wanted was lacking: they were each without customers.

The patterns of “aheads” was complex. Sequences were connected like beads on a string; there were chains of “aheads” which formed interwoven links. One step led to the next … but not to alternate chains.

Carefully, with great precision, she began the job of searching through each of the chains. There were many of them … a virtual infinity of possible “aheads.” And it was her power to select; she had stepped into that one, the particular chain in which the huddled colony had labored to construct its ship. She had, by entering it, made it manifest. Frozen it into reality. Dredged it up from among the many, from among the multitude of possibilities.

Now she needed to dredge another. That particular “ahead” had proven unsatisfactory. The market had petered out.

The truck was entering the pleasant town of Walnut Creek, passing bright stores and houses and supermarkets, before she located it. There were so many, and her mind was old … but now she had picked it out. And as soon as she found it, she knew it was the one. Her innate business instinct certified it; the particular “ahead” clicked.

Of the possibilities, this one was unique. The ship was well-built, and thoroughly tested. In “ahead” after “ahead” the ship rose, hesitated as automatic machinery locked, and then burst from the jacket of atmosphere, toward the morning star. In a few “aheads,” the wasted sequences of failure, the ship exploded into white-hot fragments. Those, she ignored; she saw no advantage in that.

In a few “aheads” the ship failed to take off at all. The turbines lashed; exhaust poured out … and the ship remained as it was. But then the men scampered out, and began going over the turbines, searching for the faulty parts. So nothing was gained. In later segments along the chain, in subsequent links, the damage was repaired, and the takeoff was satisfactorily completed.

But one chain was correct. Each element, each link, developed perfectly. The pressure locks closed, and the ship was sealed. The turbines fired, and the ship, with a shudder, rose from the plain of black ash. Three miles up, the rear jets tore loose. The ship floundered, dropped in a screaming dive, and plunged back toward the Earth. Emergency landing jets, designed for Venus, were frantically thrown on. The ship slowed, hovered for an agonizing instant, and then crashed into the heap of rubble that had been Mount Diablo. There the remains of the ship lay, twisted metal sheets, smoking in the dismal silence.

From the ship the men emerged, shaken and mute, to inspect the damage. To begin the miserable, futile task all over again. Collecting supplies, patching the rocket up … The old woman smiled to herself.

That was what she wanted. That would do perfectly. And all she had to do — such a little thing — was select that sequence when she made her next trip. When she took her little business trip, the following Saturday.

Crowley lay half buried in the black ash, pawing feebly at a deep gash in his cheek. A broken tooth throbbed. A thick ooze of blood dripped into his mouth, the hot salty taste of his own body fluids leaking helplessly out. He tried to move his leg, but there was no sensation. Broken. His mind was too dazed, too bewildered with despair, to comprehend.

Somewhere in the half-darkness, Flannery stirred. A woman groaned; scattered among the rocks and buckled sections of the ship lay the injured and dying. An upright shape rose, stumbled, and pitched over. An artificial light flickered. It was Tellman, making his way clumsily over the tattered

remains of their world. He gaped foolishly at Crowley; his glasses hung from one ear and part of his lower jaw was missing. Abruptly he collapsed face-forward into a smoking mound of supplies. His skinny body twitched aimlessly.

Crowley managed to pull himself to his knees. Masterson was bending over him, saying something again and again.

“I’m all right,” Crowley rasped.

“We’re down. Wrecked.”

“I know.”

On Masterson’s shattered face glittered the first stirrings of hysteria. “Do you think—”

“No, Crowley muttered. “It isn’t possible.”

Masterson began to giggle. Tears streaked the grime of his cheeks; drops of thick moisture dripped down his neck into his charred collar. “She did it. She fixed us. She wants us to stay here.”

“No,” Crowley repeated. He shut out the thought. It couldn’t be. It just couldn’t, “We’ll get away,” he said. “We’ll assemble the remains — start over.”

“She’ll be back,” Masterson quavered. “She knows we’ll be here waiting for her. Customers!”

“No,” Crowley said. He didn’t believe it; he made himself not believe it. “We’ll get away. We’ve *got* to get away!”

The Mold of Yancy

Leon Sipling groaned and pushed away his work papers. In an organization of thousands he was the only employee not putting out. Probably he was the only yance-man on Callisto not doing his job. Fear, and the quick pluckings of desperation, made him reach up and wave on the audio circuit to Babson, the overall office controller.

"Say," Sipling said hoarsely, "I think I'm stuck, Bab. How about running the gestalt through, up to my spot? Maybe I can pick up the rhythm…" He grinned weakly. "The hum of other creative minds."

After a speculative moment, Babson reached for the impulse synapsis, his massive face unsympathetic. "You holding up progress, Sip? This has to be integrated with the daily by six tonight. The schedule calls for the works to be on the vidlines during the dinner-hour stretch."

The visual side of the gestalt had already begun to form on the wall screen; Sipling turned his attention to it, grateful of a chance to escape Babson's cold glare.

The screen showed a 3-D of Yancy, the usual three quarter view, from the waist up. John Edward Yancy in his faded workshirt, sleeves rolled up, arms brown and furry. A middle-aged man in his late fifties, his face sunburned, neck slightly red, a goodnatured smile on his face, squinting because he was looking into the sun. Behind Yancy was a still of his yard, his garage, his flower garden, lawn, the back of his neat little white plastic house. Yancy grinned at Sipling: a neighbor pausing in the middle of a summer day, perspiring from the heat and the exertion of mowing his lawn, about to launch into a few harmless remarks about the weather, the state of the planet, the condition of the neighborhood.

“Say,” Yancy said, in the audio phones propped up on Sipling’s desk. His voice was low, personal. “The darndest thing happened to my grandson Ralf, the other morning. You know how Ralf is; he’s always getting to school half an hour early… says he likes to be in his seat before anybody else.”

“That eager-beaver,” Joe Pines, at the next desk, cat-called.

From the screen, Yancy’s voice rolled on, confident, amiable, undisturbed. “Well, Ralf saw this squirrel; it was just sitting there on the sidewalk. He stopped for a minute and watched.” The look on Yancy’s face was so real that Sipling almost believed him. He could, almost, see the squirrel and the tow-headed youngest grandson of the Yancy family, the familiar child of the familiar son of the planet’s most familiar — and beloved — person.

“This squirrel,” Yancy explained, in his homey way, “was collecting nuts. And by golly, this was just the other day, only the middle of June. And here was this little squirrel —” with his hands he indicated the size, “collecting these nuts and carrying them off for winter.”

And then, the amused, anecdote-look on Yancy’s face faded. A serious, thoughtful look replaced it: the meaningful-look. His blue eyes darkened (good color work). His jaw became more square, more imposing (good dummy-switch by the android crew). Yancy seemed older, more solemn and mature, more impressive. Behind him, the garden-scene had been jerked and a slightly different backdrop filtered in; Yancy now stood firmly planted in a cosmic landscape, among mountains and winds and huge old forests.

“I got to thinking,” Yancy said, and his voice was deeper, slower. “There was that little squirrel. How did he know winter was coming? There he was, working away, getting prepared for it.” Yancy’s voice rose. “Preparing for a winter he’d never seen.”

Sipling stiffened and prepared *himself;* it was coming. At his desk, Joe Pines grinned and yelled: “Get set!”

“That squirrel,” Yancy said solemnly, “had faith. No, he never saw any sign of winter. But he knew winter was coming.” The firm jaw moved; one hand came slowly up …

And then the image stopped. It froze, immobile, silent. No words came from it; abruptly the sermon ended, in the middle of a paragraph.

“That’s it,” Babson said briskly, filtering the Yancy out. “Help you any?”

Sipling pawed jerkily at his work papers. “No,” he admitted, “actually it doesn’t. But — I’ll get it worked out.”

“I hope so.” Babson’s face darkened ominously and his small mean eyes seemed to grow smaller. “What’s the matter with you? Home problems?”

“I’ll be okay,” Sipling muttered, sweating. “Thanks.”

On the screen a faint impression of Yancy remained, still poised at the word *coming.* The rest of the gestalt was in Sipling’s head: the continuing slice of words and gestures hadn’t been worked out and fed to the composite.

Sipling’s contribution was missing, so the entire gestalt was stopped cold in its tracks.

“Say,” Joe Pines said uneasily, “I’ll be glad to take over, today. Cut your desk out of the circuit and I’ll cut myself in.”

“Thanks,” Sipling muttered, “but I’m the only one who can get this damn part. It’s the central gem.”

“You ought to take a rest. You’ve been working too hard.”

“Yes,” Sipling agreed, on the verge of hysteria. “I’m a little under the weather.”

That was obvious: everybody in the office could see that. But only Sipling knew why. And he was fighting with all his strength to keep from screaming out the reason at the top of his lungs.

Basic analysis of the political milieu at Callisto was laid out by Niplan computing apparatus at Washington, D.C.; but the final evaluations were done by human technicians. The Washington computers could ascertain that the Callisto political structure was moving toward a totalitarian make-up, but they couldn’t say what that indicated. Human beings were required to class the drift as malign.

“It isn’t possible,” Taverner protested. “There’s constant industrial traffic in and out of Callisto; except for the Ganymede syndicate they’ve got outplanet commerce bottled up. We’d know as soon as anything phony got started.”

“How would we know?” Police Director Kellman inquired.

Taverner indicated the data-sheets, graphs and charts of figures and percentages that covered the walls of the Niplan Police offices. “It would show up in hundreds of ways. Terrorist raids, political prisons, extermination camps. We’d hear about political recanting, treason, disloyalty … all the basic props of a dictatorship.”

“Don’t confuse a totalitarian society with a dictatorship,” Kellman said dryly. “A totalitarian state reaches into every sphere of its citizens’ lives, forms their opinions on every subject. The government can be a dictatorship, or a parliament, or an elected president, or a council of priests. That doesn’t matter.”

“All right,” Taverner said, mollified. “I’ll go. I’ll take a team there and see what they’re doing.”

“Can you make yourselves look like Callistotes?”

“What are they like?”

“I’m not sure,” Kellman admitted thoughtfully, with a glance at the elaborate wall charts. “But whatever it is, they’re all beginning to turn out alike.”

Among its passengers the interplan commercial liner that settled down at Callisto carried Peter Taverner, his wife, and their two children. With a grimace of concern, Taverner made out the shapes of local officials waiting at the exit hatch. The passengers were going to be carefully screened; as the ramp descended, the clot of officials moved forward.

Taverner got to his feet and collected his family. “Ignore them,” he told Ruth. “Our papers will get us by.”

Expertly prepared documents identified him as a speculator in nonferric metals, looking for a wholesale outlet to handle his jobbing. Callisto was a clearing-point for land and mineral operations; a constant flood of wealth-hungry entrepreneurs streamed back and forth, carting raw materials from the underdeveloped moons, hauling mining equipment from the inner planets.

Cautiously, Taverner arranged his topcoat over his arm. A heavyset man, in his middle thirties, he could have passed for a successful business operator. His double-breasted business suit was expensive, but conservative. His big shoes were brightly shined. All things considered, he’d probably get by. As he and his family moved toward the exit ramp, they presented a perfect and exact imitation of the outplanet business-class.

“State your business,” a green-uniformed official demanded, pencil poised. ID tabs were being checked, photographed, recorded. Brain pattern comparisons were being made: the usual routine.

“Nonferric enterprises,” Taverner began, but a second official cut him abruptly off.

“You’re the third cop this morning. What’s biting you people on Terra?” The official eyed Taverner intently. “We’re getting more cops than ministers.”

Trying to maintain his poise, Taverner answered evenly: “I’m here to take a rest. Acute alcoholism — nothing official.”

“That’s what your cohorts said.” The official grinned humorously. “Well, what’s one more Terran cop?” He slid the lockbars aside and waved Taverner and his family through. “Welcome to Callisto. Have fun — enjoy yourselves. Fastest-growing moon in the system.”

“Practically a planet,” Taverner commented ironically.

“Any day now.” The official examined some reports. “According to our friends in your little organization, you’ve been pasting up wall graphs and charts about us. Are we that important?”

“Academic interest,” Taverner said; if three spots had been made, then the whole team had been netted. The local authorities were obviously primed to detect infiltration … the realization chilled him.

But they were letting him through. Were they *that* confident?

Things didn’t look good. Peering around for a cab, he grimly prepared to undertake the business of integrating the scattered team members into a functioning whole.

That evening, at the *Stay-Lit* bar on the main street of the commercial district of town, Taverner met with his two team members. Hunched over their whiskey sours, they compared notes.

"I've been here almost twelve hours," Eckmund stated, gazing impassively at the rows of bottles in the gloomy depths of the bar. Cigar smoke hovered in the air; the automatic music box in the corner banged away metallically. "I've been walking around town, looking at things, making observations."

"Me," Dorser said, "I've been at the tape-library. Getting official myth, comparing it to Callistote reality. And talking to the scholars — educated people hanging around the scanning rooms."

Taverner sipped his drink. "Anything of interest?"

"You know the primitive rule-of-thumb test," Eckmund said wryly. "I loafed around on a slum street corner until I got in a conversation with some people waiting for a bus. I started knocking the authorities: complaining about the bus service, the sewage disposal, taxes, everything. They chimed right in. Heartily. No hesitation. And no fear."

"The legal government," Dorser commented, "is set up in the usual archaic fashion. Two-party system, one a little more conservative than the other — no fundamental difference of course. But both elect candidates at open primaries, ballots circulated to all registered voters." A spasm of amusement touched him. "This is a model democracy. I read the text books. Nothing but idealistic slogans: freedom of speech, assembly, religion — the works. Same old grammar school stuff."

The three of them were temporarily silent.

"There are jails," Taverner said slowly. "Every society has law violations."

“I visited one,” Eckmund said, belching. “Petty thieves, murderers, claim-jumpers, strong-arm hoods — the usual.”

“No political prisoners?”

“No.” Eckmund raised his voice. “We might as well discuss this at the top of our lungs. Nobody cares — the authorities don’t care.”

“Probably after we’re gone they’ll clap a few thousand people into prison,” Dorser murmured thoughtfully.

“My God,” Eckmund retorted, “people can leave Callisto any time they want. If you’re operating a police state you have to keep your borders shut. And these borders are wide open. People pour in and out.”

“Maybe it’s a chemical in the drinking water,” Dorser suggested.

“How the hell can they have a totalitarian society without terrorism?” Eckmund demanded rhetorically. “I’ll swear to it — there are no thought-control cops here. There is absolutely no fear.”

“Somehow, pressure is being exerted,” Taverner persisted.

“Not by cops,” Dorser said emphatically. “Not by force and brutality. Not by illegal arrest and imprisonment and forced labor.”

“If this were a police state,” Eckmund said thoughtfully, “there’d be some kind of resistance movement. Some sort of ‘subversive’ group trying to overthrow the authorities. But in this society you’re free to complain; you can buy time on the TV and radio stations, you can buy space in the newspapers — anything you want.” He shrugged. “So how can there be a clandestine resistance movement? It’s silly.”

“Nevertheless,” Taverner said, “these people are living in a one-party society with a party line, with an official ideology. They show the effects of

a carefully controlled totalitarian state. They're guinea pigs — whether they realize it or not."

"Wouldn't they realize it?"

Baffled, Taverner shook his head. "I would have thought so. There must be some mechanism we don't understand."

"It's all open. We can look everything over."

"We must be looking for the wrong thing." Idly, Taverner gazed at the television screen above the bar. The nude girlie song-and-dance routine had ended; now the features of a man faded into view. A genial, round-faced man in his fifties, with guileless blue eyes, an almost childish twitch to his lips, a fringe of brown hair playing around his slightly prominent ears.

"Friends," the TV image rumbled, "it's good to be with you again, tonight. I thought I might have a little chat with you."

"A commercial," Dorser said, signalling the bartending machine for another drink.

"Who is that?" Taverner asked curiously.

"That kindly-looking geezer?" Eckmund examined his notes. "A sort of popular commentator. Name of Yancy."

"Is he part of the government?"

"Not that I know of. A kind of home-spun philosopher. I picked up a biography of him on a magazine stand." Eckmund passed the gaily-colored pamphlet to his boss. "Totally ordinary man, as far as I can see. Used to be a soldier; in the Mars-Jupiter War he distinguished himself — battlefield commission. Rose to the rank of major." He shrugged indifferently. "A sort

of talking almanac. Pithy sayings on every topic. Wise old saws: how to cure a chest cold. What the trouble is back on Terra.”

Taverner examined the booklet. “Yes, I saw his picture around.”

“Very popular figure. Loved by the masses. Man of the people — speaks for them. When I was buying cigarettes I noticed he endorses one particular brand. Very popular brand, now; just about driven the others off the market. Same with beer. The Scotch in this glass is probably the brand Yancy endorses. The same with tennis balls. Only he doesn’t play tennis — he plays croquet. All the time, every weekend.” Accepting his fresh drink Eckmund finished, “So now everybody plays croquet.”

“How can croquet be a planetwide sport?” Taverner demanded.

“This isn’t a planet,” Dorser put in. “It’s a pipsqueak moon.”

“Not according to Yancy,” Eckmund said. “We’re supposed to think of Callisto as a planet.”

“How?” Taverner asked.

“Spiritually, it’s a planet. Yancy likes people to take a spiritual view of matters. He’s strong on God and honesty in government and being hardworking and clean-cut. Warmed-over truisms.”

The expression on Taverner’s face hardened. “Interesting,” he murmured. “I’ll have to drop by and meet him.”

“Why? He’s the dullest, most mediocre man you could dream up.”

“Maybe,” Taverner answered, “that’s why I’m interested.”

Babson, huge and menacing, met Taverner at the entrance of the Yancy Building. “Of course you can meet Mr. Yancy. But he’s a busy man — it’ll take a while to squeeze in an appointment. Everybody wants to meet Mr. Yancy.”

Taverner was unimpressed. “How long do I have to wait?”

As they crossed the main lobby to the elevators, Babson made a computation. “Oh, say four months.”

“Four *months?*”

“John Yancy is just about the most popular man alive.”

“Around here, maybe,” Taverner commented angrily, as they entered the packed elevator. “I never heard of him before. If he’s got so much on the ball, why isn’t he piped all around Niplan?”

“Actually,” Babson admitted, in a hoarse, confidential whisper, “I can’t imagine what people see in Yancy. As far as I’m concerned he’s just a big bag of wind. But people around here enjoy him. After all, Callisto is — provincial. Yancy appeals to a certain type of rural mind — to people who like their world simple. I’m afraid Terra would be too sophisticated for Yancy.”

“Have you tried?”

“Not yet,” Babson said. Reflectively, he added: “Maybe later.”

While Taverner was pondering the meaning of the big man’s words, the elevator ceased climbing. The two of them stepped off into a luxurious, carpeted hall, illuminated by recessed lights. Babson pushed open a door, and they entered a large, active office.

Inside, a screening of a recent Yancy gestalt was in progress. A group of yance-men watched it silently, faces alert and critical. The gestalt showed Yancy sitting at his old-fashioned oak desk, in his study. It was obvious that he had been working on some philosophical thoughts: spread out over the desk were books and papers. On Yancy's face was a thoughtful expression; he sat with his hand against his forehead, features screwed up into a solemn study of concentration.

"This is for next Sunday morning," Babson explained.

Yancy's lips moved, and he spoke. "Friends," he began, in his deep, personal, friendly, man-to-man voice, "I've been sitting here at my desk — well, about the way you're sitting around your living rooms." A switch in camera work occurred; it showed the open door of Yancy's study. In the living room was the familiar figure of Yancy's sweet-faced middle-aged homey wife; she was sitting on the comfortable sofa, primly sewing. On the floor their grandson Ralf played the familiar game of jacks. The family dog snoozed in the corner.

One of the watching yance-men made a note on his pad. Taverner glanced at him curiously, baffled.

"Of course, I was in there with them," Yancy continued, smiling briefly. "I was reading the funnies to Ralf. He was sitting on my knee." The background faded, and a momentary phantom scene of Yancy sitting with his grandson on his knee floated into being. Then the desk and the book-lined study returned. "I'm mighty grateful for my family," Yancy revealed. "In these times of stress, it's my family that I turn to, as my pillar of strength." Another notation was made by a watching yance-man.

"Sitting here, in my study, this wonderful Sunday morning," Yancy rumbled on, "I realize how lucky we are to be alive, and to have this lovely planet, and the fine cities and houses, all the things God has given us to enjoy. But we've got to be careful. We've got to make sure we don't lose these things."

A change had come over Yancy. It seemed to Taverner that the image was subtly altering. It wasn't the same man; the good humor was gone. This was an older man, and larger. A firm-eyed father, speaking to his children.

"My friends," Yancy intoned, "there are forces that could weaken this planet. Everything we've built up for our loved ones, for our children, *could be taken away from us overnight.* We must learn to be vigilant. We must protect our liberties, our possessions, our way of life. If we become divided, and fall to bickering among each other, we will be easy prey for our enemies. We must work together, my friends.

"That's what I've been thinking about this Sunday morning. *Cooperation. Teamwork.* We've got to be secure, and to be secure, we must be one united people. That's the key, my friends, the key to a more abundant life." Pointing out the window at the lawn and garden, Yancy said: "You know, I was …"

The voice trailed off. The image froze. Full room lights came on, and the watching yance-men moved into muttering activity.

"Fine," one of them said. "So far, at least. But where's the rest?"

"Sipling, again," another answered. "His slice still hasn't come through. What's wrong with that guy?"

Scowling, Babson detached himself. "Pardon me," he said to Taverner.

"I'll have to excuse myself-technical matters. You're free to look around, if you care to. Help yourself to any of the literature — anything you want."

"Thanks," Taverner said uncertainly. He was confused; everything *seemed* harmless, even trivial. But something basic was wrong.

Suspiciously, he began to prowl.

It was obvious that John Yancy had pontificated on every known subject. A Yancy opinion on every conceivable topic was available… modern art, or garlic in cooking, or the use of intoxicating beverages, or eating meat, or socialism, or war, or education, or open-front dresses on women, or high taxes, or atheism, or divorce, or patriotism — every shade and nuance of opinion possible.

Was there any subject that Yancy *hadn't* expressed himself on?

Taverner examined the voluminous tapes that lined the walls of the offices. Yancy's utterances had run into billions of tape feet… could one man have an opinion on everything in the universe?

Choosing a tape at random, he found himself being addressed on the topic of table manners.

"You know," the miniature Yancy began, his voice tinny in Taverner's ears, "at dinner the other night I happened to notice how my grandson Ralf was cutting his steak." Yancy grinned at the viewer, as an image of the six-year-old boy sawing grimly away floated briefly into sight. "Well, I got to thinking, there was Ralf working away at that steak, not having any luck with it. And it seemed to me —"

Taverner snapped the tape off and returned it to the slot. Yancy had definite opinions on everything… or *were* they so definite?

A strange suspicion was growing in him. On some topics, yes. On minor issues, Yancy had exact rules, specific maxims drawn from mankind's rich storehouse of folklore. But major philosophical and political issues were something else again.

Getting out one of the many tapes listed under War, Taverner ran it through at random.

"… I'm against war," Yancy pronounced angrily. "And I ought to know; I've done my share of fighting."

There followed a montage of battle scenes: the Jupiter-Mars War in which Yancy had distinguished himself by his bravery, his concern for his comrades, his hatred of the enemy, his variety of proper emotions.

"But," Yancy continued staunchly, "I feel a planet must be strong. We must not surrender ourselves meekly … weakness invites attack and fosters aggression. By being weak we promote war. We must gird ourselves and protect those we love. With all my heart and soul I'm against useless wars; but I say again, as I've said many times before, a man must come forward and fight *a just* war. He must not shrink from his responsibility. War is a terrible thing. But sometimes we must…"

As he restored the tape, Taverner wondered just what the hell Yancy *had* said. What were his views on war? They took up a hundred separate reels of tape; Yancy was always ready to hold forth on such vital and grandiose subjects as War, the Planet, God, Taxation. But did he *say* anything?

A cold chill crawled up Taverner's spine. On specific — and trivial — items there were absolute opinions: dogs are better than cats, grapefruit is too sour without a dash of sugar, it's good to get up early in the morning, too much drinking is bad. But on big topics … an empty vacuum, filled with the vacant roll of high-sounding phrases. A public that agreed with Yancy on war and taxes and God and planet agreed with absolutely nothing. And with everything.

On topics of importance, they had no opinion at all. They only *thought* they had an opinion.

Rapidly, Taverner scanned tapes on various major subjects. It was the same all down the line. With one sentence Yancy gave; with the next he took away. The total effect was a neat cancellation, a skillful negation. But the viewer was left with the illusion of having consumed a rich and varied

intellectual feast. It was amazing. And it was professional: the ends were tied up too slickly to be mere accident.

Nobody was as harmless and vapid as John Edward Yancy. He was just too damn good to be true.

Sweating, Taverner left the main reference room and poked his way toward the rear offices, where busy yance-men worked away at their desks and assembly tables. Activity whirred on all sides. The expression on the faces around him was benign, harmless, almost bored. The same friendly, trivial expression that Yancy himself displayed.

Harmless — and in its harmlessness, diabolical. And there wasn't a damn thing he could do. If people liked to listen to John Edward Yancy, if they wanted to model themselves after him — what could the Niplan Police do about it?

What crime was being committed?

No wonder Babson didn't care if the police prowled around. No wonder the authorities had freely admitted them. There weren't any political jails of labor gangs or concentration camps … there didn't have to be.

Torture chambers and extermination camps were needed only when persuasion failed. And persuasion was working perfectly. A police state, rule by terror, came about when the totalitarian apparatus began to break down. The earlier totalitarian societies had been incomplete; the authorities hadn't really gotten into every sphere of life. But techniques of communication had improved.

The first really successful totalitarian state was being realized before his eyes: harmless and trivial, it emerged. And the last stage — nightmarish, but perfectly logical — was when all the newborn boys were happily and voluntarily named John Edward.

Why not? They already lived, acted, and thought like John Edward. And there was Mrs. Margaret Ellen Yancy, for the women. She had her full range of opinions, too; she had her kitchen, her taste in clothes, her little recipes and advice, for all the women to imitate.

There were even Yancy children for the youth of the planet to imitate. The authorities hadn't overlooked anything.

Babson strolled over, a genial expression on his face. "How's it going, officer?" he chuckled wetly, putting his hand on Taverner's shoulder.

"Fine," Taverner managed to answer; he evaded the hand.

"You like our little establishment?" There was genuine pride in Babson's thick voice. "We do a good job. An artistic job — we have real standards of excellence."

Shaking with helpless anger, Taverner plunged out of the office and into the hall. The elevator took too long; furiously, he turned toward the stairs. He had to get out of the Yancy Building; he had to get away.

From the shadows of the hall a man appeared, face pale and taut. "Wait. Can I talk to you?"

Taverner pushed past him. "What do you want?"

"You're from the Terran Niplan Police? I —" The man's Adam's apple bobbed. "I work here. My name's Sipling, Leon Sipling. I have to do something — I can't stand it anymore."

"Nothing can be done," Taverner told him. "If they want to be like Yancy —"

"But there isn't any Yancy," Sipling broke in, his thin face twitching spasmodically. "We made him up … we invented him."

Taverner halted. “You *what?*”

“I’ve decided.” Voice quavering excitedly, Sipling rushed on: “I’m going to do something — and I know exactly what.” Catching hold of Taverner’s sleeve he grated: “You’ve got to help me. I can stop all this, but I can’t do it alone.”

In Leon Sipling’s attractive, well-furnished living room, the two of them sat drinking coffee and watching their children scramble around on the floor, playing games. Sipling’s wife and Ruth Taverner were in the kitchen, drying the dishes.

“Yancy is a synthesis,” Sipling explained. “A sort of composite person. No such individual actually exists. We drew on basic prototypes from sociological records; we based the gestalt on various typical persons. So it’s true to life. But we stripped off what we didn’t want, and intensified what we did want.”

Broodingly, he added: “There could be a Yancy. There are a lot of Yancy-like people. In fact, that’s the problem.”

“You deliberately set out with the idea of remolding people along Yancy’s line?” Taverner inquired.

“I can’t precisely say what the idea is, at top level. I was an ad writer for a mouthwash company. The Callisto authorities hired me and outlined what they wanted me to do. I’ve had to guess as to the purpose of the project.”

“By authorities, you mean the governing council?”

Sipling laughed sharply. “I mean the trading syndicates that own this moon: lock, stock, and barrel. But we’re not supposed to call it a moon. It’s a planet.” His lips twitched bitterly. “Apparently, the authorities have a big program built up. It involves absorbing their trade rivals on Ganymede — when that’s done, they’ll have the outplanets sewed up tight.”

“They can’t get at Ganymede without open war,” Taverner protested. “The Medean companies have their own population behind them.” And then it dawned. “I see,” he said softly. “They’d actually start a war. It would be worth a war, to them.”

“You’re damn right it would. And to start a war, they have to get the public lined up. Actually, the people here have nothing to gain. A war would wipe out all the small operators — it would concentrate power in fewer hands — and they’re few enough already. To get the eighty million people here behind the war, they need an indifferent, sheep-like public. *And they’re getting that.* When this Yancy campaign is finished, the people here on Callisto will accept anything. Yancy does all their thinking for them. He tells them how to wear their hair. What games to play. He tells the jokes the men repeat in their back rooms. His wife whips up the meal they all have for dinner. All over this little world — millions of duplicates of Yancy’s day. Whatever he does, whatever he believes. We’ve been conditioning the public for eleven straight years. The important thing is the unvarying monotony of it. A whole generation is growing up looking to Yancy for an answer to everything.”

“It’s a big business, then,” Taverner observed. “This project of creating and maintaining Yancy.”

“Thousands of people are involved in just writing the material. You only saw the first stage — and it goes into every city. Tapes, films, books, magazines, posters, pamphlets, dramatic visual and audio shows, plants in the newspapers, sound trucks, kids’ comic strips, word-of-mouth report, elaborate ads … the works. A steady stream of Yancy.” Picking up a magazine from the coffee table he indicated the lead article. ” ‘How is John Yancy’s Heart?’ Raises the question of what would we do without Yancy? Next week, an article on Yancy’s stomach.” Acidly, Sipling finished: “We know a million approaches. We turn it out of every pore. We’re called yance-men; it’s a new art-form.”

“How do you — the corps, feel about Yancy?”

“He’s a big sack of hot air.”

“None of you is convinced?”

“Even Babson has to laugh. And Babson is at the top; after him come the boys who sign the checks. God, if we ever started believing in Yancy … if we got started thinking that trash *meant* something —” An expression of acute agony settled over Sipling’s face. “That’s it. That’s why I can’t stand it.”

“Why?” Taverner asked, deeply curious. His throat-mike was taking it all in, relaying it back to the home office at Washington. “I’m interested in finding out why you broke away.”

Sipling bent down and called his son. “Mike, stop playing and come on over here.” To Taverner he explained: “Mike’s nine years old. Yancy’s been around as long as he’s been alive.”

Mike came dully over. “Yes, sir?”

“What kind of marks do you get in school?” his father asked.

The boy’s chest stuck out proudly; he was a clear-eyed little miniature of Leon Sipling. “All A’s and B’s.”

“He’s a smart kid,” Sipling said to Taverner. “Good in arithmetic, geography, history, all that stuff.” Turning to the boy he said: “I’m going to ask you some questions; I want this gentleman to hear your answers. Okay?”

“Yes, sir,” the boy said obediently.

His thin face grim, Sipling said to his son: “I want to know what you think about war. You’ve been told about war in school; you know about all

the famous wars in history. Right?”

“Yes, sir. We learned about the American Revolution, and the First Global War, and then the Second Global War, and then the First Hydrogen War, and the War between the colonists on Mars and Jupiter.”

“To the schools,” Sipling explained tightly to Taverner, “we distribute Yancy material — educational subsidies in packet form. Yancy takes children through history, explains the meaning of it all. Yancy explains natural science. Yancy explains good posture and astronomy and every other thing in the universe. But I never thought my own son …” His voice trailed off unhappily, then picked up life. “So you know all about war. Okay, what do you think of war?”

Promptly, the boy answered: “War is bad. War is the most terrible thing there is. It almost destroyed mankind.”

Eying his son intently, Sipling demanded: “Did anybody tell you to say that?”

The boy faltered uncertainly. “No, sir.”

“You really believe those things?”

“Yes, sir. It’s true, isn’t it? Isn’t war bad?”

Sipling nodded. “War is bad. But what *about just* wars?”

Without hesitation the boy answered: “We have to fight just wars, of course.”

“Why?”

“Well, we have to protect our way of life.”

“Why?”

Again, there was no hesitation in the boy’s reedy answer. “We can’t let them walk over us, sir. That would encourage aggressive war. We can’t permit a world of brute power. We have to have a world of —” He searched for the exact word. “A world *of law.”*

Wearily, half to himself, Sipling commented: “I wrote those meaningless, contradictory words myself, eight years ago.” Pulling himself together with a violent effort he asked: “So war is bad. But we have to fight just wars. Well, maybe this *planet,* Callisto, will get into a war with … let’s pick Ganymede, at random.” He was unable to keep the harsh irony from his voice. “Just at random. Now, we’re at war with Ganymede. Is it a *just* war? Or only a war?”

This time, there was no answer. The boy’s smooth face was screwed up in a bewildered, struggling frown.

“No answer?” Sipling inquired icily.

“Why, uh,” the boy faltered. “I mean…” He glanced up hopefully. “When the time comes won’t somebody say?”

“Sure,” Sipling choked. “Somebody will say. Maybe even Mr. Yancy.”

Relief flooded the boy’s face. “Yes, sir. Mr. Yancy will say.” He retreated back toward the other children. “Can I go now?”

As the boy scampered back to his game, Sipling turned miserably to Taverner. “You know what game they’re playing? It’s called Hippo-Hoppo. Guess whose grandson just loves it. Guess who invented the game.”

There was silence.

“What do you suggest?” Taverner asked. “You said you thought something could be done.”

A cold expression appeared on Sipling’s face, a flash of deeply-felt cunning. “I know the project… I know how it can be pried apart. But somebody has to stand with a gun at the head of the authorities. In nine years I’ve come to see the essential key to the Yancy character … the key to the new type of person we’re growing, here. It’s simple. It’s the element that makes that person malleable enough to be led around.”

“I’ll bite,” Taverner said patiently, hoping the line to Washington was good and clear.

“All Yancy’s beliefs are insipid. The key is *thinness.* Every part of his ideology is diluted: nothing excessive. We’ve come as close as possible to *no* beliefs … you’ve noticed that. Wherever possible we’ve cancelled attitudes out, left the person apolitical. Without a viewpoint.”

“Sure,” Taverner agreed. “But with the illusion of a viewpoint.”

“All aspects of personality have to be controlled; we want the total person. So a specific attitude has to exist for each concrete question. In every respect, our rule is: *Yancy believes the least troublesome possibility.* The most shallow. The simple, effortless view, the view that fails to go deep enough to stir any real thought.”

Taverner got the drift. “Good solid lulling views.” Excitedly he hurried on, “But if an extreme original view got in, one that took real effort to work out, something that was hard to live …”

“Yancy plays croquet. So everybody fools around with a mallet.” Sipling’s eyes gleamed. “But suppose Yancy had a preference for — Kriegspiel.”

“For what?”

“Chess played on two boards. Each player has his own board, with a complete set of men. He never sees the other board. A moderator sees both; he tells each player when he’s taken a piece, or lost a piece, or moved into an occupied square, or made an impossible move, or checked, or is in check himself.”

“I see,” Taverner said quickly. “Each player tries to infer his opponent’s location on the board. He plays blind. Lord, it would take every mental faculty possible.”

“The Prussians taught their officers military strategy that way. It’s more than a game: it’s a cosmic wrestling match. What if Yancy sat down in the evening with his wife and grandson, and played a nice lively six-hour game of Kriegspiel? Suppose his favorite books — instead of being western gun-toting anachronisms — were Greek tragedy? Suppose his favorite piece of music was *Bach’s Art of the Fugue,* not *My Old Kentucky Home?”*

“I’m beginning to get the picture,” Taverner said, as calmly as possible. “I think we can help.”

Babson squeaked once. “But this is — illegal!”

“Absolutely,” Taverner acknowledged. “That’s why we’re here.” He waved the squad of Niplan secret-servicemen into the offices of the Yancy Building, ignoring the stunned workers sitting bolt-upright at their desks. Into his throat-mike he said, “How’s it coming with the bigshots?”

“Medium,” Kellman’s faint voice came, strengthened by the relay system between Callisto and Earth. “Some slipped out of bounds to their various holdings, of course. But the majority never thought we’d taken action.”

“You can’t!” Babson bleated, his great face hanging down in wattles of white dough. “What have we done? What law —”

“I think,” Taverner interrupted, “we can get you on purely commercial grounds alone. You’ve used the name Yancy to endorse various manufactured products. There’s no such person. That’s a violation of statutes governing ethical presentation of advertising.”

Babson’s mouth closed with a snap, then slid feebly open. “No — such — person? But everybody knows John Yancy. Why, he’s —” Stammering, gesturing, he finished, “He’s everywhere.”

Suddenly a wretched little pistol appeared in his pulpy hand; he was waving it wildly as Dorser stepped up and quietly knocked it skidding across the floor. Babson collapsed into fumbling hysterics.

Disgusted, Dorser clamped handgrapples around him. “Act like a man,” he ordered. But there was no response; Babson was too far gone to hear him.

Satisfied, Taverner plunged off, past the knot of stunned officials and workers, into the inner offices of the project. Nodding curtly, Taverner made his way up to the desk where Leon Sipling sat surrounded by his work.

The first of the altered gestalts was already flickering through the scanner. Together, the two men stood watching it.

“Well?” Taverner said, when it was done. “You’re the judge.”

“I believe it’ll do,” Sipling answered nervously. “I hope we don’t stir up too much … it’s taken eleven years to build it up; we want to tear it down by degrees.”

“Once the first crack is made, it should start swaying.” Taverner moved toward the door. “Will you be all right on your own?”

Sipling glanced at Eckmund who lounged at the end of the office, eyes fixed on the uneasily working yance-men. “I suppose so. Where are you going?”

“I want to watch this as it’s released. I want to be around when the public gets its first look at it.” At the door, Taverner lingered. “It’s going to be a big job for you, putting out the gestalt on your own. You may not get much help, for a while.”

Sipling indicated his co-workers; they were already beginning to pick up their tempo where they had left off. “They’ll stay on the job,” he disagreed. “As long as they get full salaries.”

Taverner walked thoughtfully across the hall to the elevator. A moment later he was on his way downstairs.

At a nearby street corner, a group of people had collected around a public vidscreen. Anticipating the late-afternoon TV cast of John Edward Yancy.

The gestalt began in the regular way. There was no doubt about it: when Sipling wanted to, he could put together a good slice. And in this case he had done practically the whole pie.

In rolled-up shirt sleeves and dirt-stained trousers, Yancy crouched in his garden, a trowel in one hand, straw hat pulled down over his eyes, grinning into the warm glare of the sun. It was so real that Taverner could hardly believe no such person existed. But he had watched Sipling’s sub-crews laboriously and expertly constructing the thing from the ground up.

“Afternoon,” Yancy rumbled genially. He wiped perspiration from his steaming, florid face and got stiffly to his feet. “Man,” he admitted, “it’s a hot day.” He indicated a flat of primroses. “I was setting them out. Quite a job.”

So far so good. The crowd watched impassively, taking their ideological nourishment without particular resistance. All over the moon, in every house, schoolroom, office, on each street corner, the same gestalt was showing. And it would be shown again.

"Yes," Yancy repeated, "it's really hot. Too hot for those primroses — they like shade." A fast pan-up showed he had carefully planted his primroses in the shadows at the base of his garage. "On the other hand," Yancy continued, in his smooth, goodnatured, over-the-back-fence conversational voice, "my dahlias need lots of sun."

The camera leaped to show the dahlias blooming frantically in the blazing sunlight.

Throwing himself down in a striped lawnchair, Yancy removed his straw hat and wiped his brow with a pocket handkerchief. "So," he continued genially, "if anybody asked me which is better, shade or sun, I'd have to reply it depends on whether you're a primrose or a dahlia." He grinned his famous guileless boyish grin into the cameras. "I guess I must be a primrose — I've had all the sun I can stand for today."

The audience was taking it in without complaint. An inauspicious beginning, but it was going to have long-term consequences. And Yancy was starting to develop them right now.

His genial grin faded. That familiar look, that awaited serious frown showing that deep thoughts were coming, faded into place. Yancy was going to hold forth: wisdom was on the way. But it was nothing ever uttered by him before.

"You know," Yancy said slowly, seriously, "that makes a person do some thinking." Automatically, he reached for his glass of gin and tonic — a glass which up until now would have contained beer. And the magazine beside it wasn't *Dog Stories Monthly;* it was *The Journal of Psychological Review.* The alteration of peripheral props would sink in subliminally; right now, all conscious attention was riveted on Yancy's words.

“It occurs to me,” Yancy orated, as if the wisdom were fresh and brand-new, arriving just now, “that some people might maintain that, say, sunlight is *good* and shade is *bad.* But that’s down-right silly. Sunlight is good for roses and dahlias, but it would darn well finish off my fuchsias.” The camera showed his ubiquitous prize fuchsias.

“Maybe you know people like that. They just don’t understand that —” And as was his custom, Yancy drew on folklore to make his point. “That one man’s meat,” he stated profoundly, “is another man’s poison. Like for instance, for breakfast I like a couple of eggs done sunny-side up, maybe a few stewed prunes, and a piece of toast. But Margaret, she prefers a bowl of cereal. And Ralf, he won’t take either. He likes flapjacks. And the fellow down the street, the one with the big front lawn, he likes a kidney pie and a bottle of stout.”

Taverner winced. Well, they would have to feel their way along. But still the audience stood absorbing it, word after word. The first feeble stirrings of a radical idea: that each person had a different set of values, a unique style of life. That each person might believe, enjoy, and approve of different things.

It would take time, as Sipling said. The massive library of tapes would have to be replaced; injunctions built up in each area would have to be broken down. A new type of thinking was being introduced, starting with a trite observation about primroses. When a nine-year-old-boy wanted to find out if a war was just or unjust, he would have to inquire into his own mind. There would be no ready answer from Yancy; a gestalt was already being prepared on that, showing that every war had been called just by some, unjust by others.

There was one gestalt Taverner wished he could see. But it wouldn’t be around for a long time; it would have to wait. Yancy was going to change his taste in art, slowly but steadily. One of these days, the public would learn that Yancy no longer enjoyed pastoral calendar scenes.

That now he preferred the art of that fifteenth century Dutch master of macabre and diabolical horror, Hieronymus Bosch.

The Minority Report

I

The first thought Anderton had when he saw the young man was: *I'm getting bald. Bald and fat and old.* But he didn't say it aloud. Instead, he pushed back his chair, got to his feet, and came resolutely around the side of his desk, his right hand rigidly extended. Smiling with forced amiability, he shook hands with the young man.

"Witwer?" he asked, managing to make this query sound gracious. "That's right," the young man said. "But the name's Ed to you, of course. That is, if you share my dislike for needless formality." The look on his blond, overly-confident face showed that he considered the matter settled. It would be Ed and John: Everything would be agreeably cooperative right from the start.

"Did you have much trouble finding the building?" Anderton asked guardedly, ignoring the too-friendly overture. *Good God, he had to hold on to something.* Fear touched him and he began to sweat. Witwer was moving around the office as if he already owned it — as if he were measuring it for size. Couldn't he wait a couple of days — a decent interval?

"No trouble," Witwer answered blithely, his hands in his pockets. Eagerly, he examined the voluminous files that lined the wall. "I'm not coming into your agency blind, you understand. I have quite a few ideas of my own about the way Precrime is run."

Shakily, Anderton lit his pipe. "How is it run? I should like to know."

"Not badly," Witwer said. "In fact, quite well."

Anderton regarded him steadily. “Is that your private opinion? Or is it just cant?”

Witwer met his gaze guilelessly. “Private and public. The Senate’s pleased with your work. In fact, they’re enthusiastic.” He added, “As enthusiastic as very old men can be.”

Anderton winced, but outwardly he remained impassive. It cost him an effort, though. He wondered what Witwer *really* thought. What was actually going on in that closecropped skull? The young man’s eyes were blue, bright — and disturbingly clever. Witwer was nobody’s fool. And obviously he had a great deal of ambition.

“As I understand it,” Anderton said cautiously, “you’re going to be my assistant until I retire.”

“That’s my understanding, too,” the other replied, without an instant’s hesitation.

“Which may be this year, or next year — or ten years from now.” The pipe in Anderton’s hand trembled. “I’m under no compulsion to retire. I founded Precrime and I can stay on here as long as I want. It’s purely *my* decision.”

Witwer nodded, his expression still guileless. “Of course.”

With an effort, Anderton cooled down a trifle. “I merely wanted to get things straight.”

“From the start,” Witwer agreed. “You’re the boss. What you say goes.” With every evidence of sincerity, he asked: “Would you care to show me the organization? I’d like to familiarize myself with the general routine as soon as possible.”

As they walked along the busy, yellow-lit tiers of offices, Anderton said: “You’re acquainted with the theory of precrime, of course. I presume we can take that for granted.”

“I have the information publicly available,” Witwer replied. “With the aid of your precog mutants, you’ve boldly and successfully abolished the post-crime punitive system of jails and fines. As we all realize, punishment was never much of a deterrent, and could scarcely have afforded comfort to a victim already dead.”

They had come to the descent lift. As it carried them swiftly downward, Anderton said: “You’ve probably grasped the basic legalistic drawback to precrime methodology. We’re taking in individuals who have broken no law.”

“But they surely will,” Witwer affirmed with conviction.

“Happily they *don’t* — because we get them first, before they can commit an act of violence. So the commission of the crime itself is absolute metaphysics. We claim they’re culpable. They, on the other hand, eternally claim they’re innocent. And, in a sense, they *are* innocent.”

The lift let them out, and they again paced down a yellow corridor. “In our society we have no major crimes,” Anderton went on, “but we do have a detention camp full of would-be criminals.”

Doors opened and closed, and they were in the analytical wing. Ahead of them rose impressive banks of equipment — the data-receptors, and the computing mechanisms that studied and restructured the incoming material. And beyond the machinery sat the three precogs, almost lost to view in the maze of wiring.

“There they are,” Anderton said dryly. “What do you think of them?” In the gloomy half-darkness the three idiots sat babbling. Every incoherent utterance, every random syllable, was analyzed, compared, reassembled in the form of visual symbols, transcribed on conventional punchcards, and

ejected into various coded slots. All day long the idiots babbled, imprisoned in their special high-backed chairs, held in one rigid position by metal bands, and bundles of wiring, clamps. Their physical needs were taken care of automatically. They had no spiritual needs. Vegetable-like, they muttered and dozed and existed. Their minds were dull, confused, lost in shadows.

But not the shadows of today. The three gibbering, fumbling creatures, with their enlarged heads and wasted bodies, were contemplating the future. The analytical machinery was recording prophecies, and as the three precog idiots talked, the machinery carefully listened.

For the first time Witwer's face lost its breezy confidence. A sick, dismayed expression crept into his eyes, a mixture of shame and moral shock. "It's not — pleasant," he murmured. "I didn't realize they were so — " He groped in his mind for the right word, gesticulating. "So — deformed."

"Deformed and retarded," Anderton instantly agreed. "Especially the girl, there. Donna is forty-five years old. But she looks about ten. The talent absorbs everything; the esp-lobe shrivels the balance of the frontal area. But what do we care? We get their prophecies. They pass on what we need. They don't understand any of it, but *we* do."

Subdued, Witwer crossed the room to the machinery. From a slot he collected a stack of cards. "Are these names that have come up?" he asked.

"Obviously." Frowning, Anderton took the stack from him. "I haven't had a chance to examine them," he explained, impatiently concealing his annoyance.

Fascinated, Witwer watched the machinery pop a fresh card into the now empty slot. It was followed by a second — and a third. From the whirring disks came one card after another. "The precogs must see quite far into the future," Witwer exclaimed.

“They see a quite limited span,” Anderton informed him. “One week or two ahead at the very most. Much of their data is worthless to us — simply not relevant to our line. We pass it on to the appropriate agencies. And they in turn trade data with us. Every important bureau has its cellar of treasured *monkeys.”*

“Monkeys?” Witwer stared at him uneasily. “Oh, yes, I understand. See no evil, speak no evil, et cetera. Very amusing.”

“Very *apt.”* Automatically, Anderton collected the fresh cards which had been turned up by the spinning machinery. “Some of these names will be totally discarded. And most of the remainder record petty crimes: thefts, income tax evasion, assault, extortion. As I’m sure you know, Precrime has cut down felonies by ninety-nine and decimal point eight percent. We seldom get actual murder or treason. After all, the culprit knows we’ll confine him in the detention camp a week before he gets a chance to commit the crime.”

“When was the last time an actual murder was committed?” Witwer asked.

“Five years ago,” Anderton said, pride in his voice.

“How did it happen?”

“The criminal escaped our teams. We had his name — in fact, we had all the details of the crime, including the victim’s name. We knew the exact moment, the location of the planned act of violence. But in spite of us he was able to carry it out.” Anderton shrugged. “After all, we can’t get all of them.” He riffled the cards. “But we do get most.”

“One murder in five years.” Witwer’s confidence was returning. “Quite an impressive record… something to be proud of.”

Quietly Anderton said: “I *am* proud. Thirty years ago I worked out the theory — back in the days when the self-seekers were thinking in terms of quick raids on the stock market. I saw something legitimate ahead — something of tremendous social value.”

He tossed the packet of cards to Wally Page, his subordinate in charge of the monkey block. “See which ones we want,” he told him. “Use your own judgment.”

As Page disappeared with the cards, Witwer said thoughtfully: “It’s a big responsibility.”

“Yes, it is,” agreed Anderton. “If we let one criminal escape — as we did five years ago — we’ve got a human life on our conscience. We’re solely responsible. If we slip up, somebody dies.” Bitterly, he jerked three new cards from the slot. “It’s a public trust.”

“Are you ever tempted to — ” Witwer hesitated. “I mean, some of the men you pick up must offer you plenty.”

“It wouldn’t do any good. A duplicate file of cards pops out at Army GHQ. It’s check and balance. They can keep their eye on us as continuously as they wish.” Anderton glanced briefly at the top card. “So even if we wanted to accept a — “

He broke off, his lips tightening.

“What’s the matter?” Witwer asked curiously.

Carefully, Anderton folded up the top card and put it away in his pocket. “Nothing,” he muttered. “Nothing at all.”

The harshness in his voice brought a flush to Witwer’s face. “You really don’t like me,” he observed.

“True,” Anderton admitted. “I don’t. But — “

He couldn’t believe he disliked the young man that much. It didn’t seem possible: it *wasn’t* possible. Something was wrong. Dazed, he tried to steady his tumbling mind.

On the card was his name. Line one — an already accused future murderer! According to the coded punches, Precrime Commissioner John A. Anderton was going to kill a man — and within the next week.

With absolute, overwhelming conviction, he didn’t believe it.

II

In the outer office, talking to Page, stood Anderton's slim and attractive young wife, Lisa. She was engaged in a sharp, animated discussion of policy, and barely glanced up as Witwer and her husband entered.

"Hello, darling," Anderton said.

Witwer remained silent. But his pale eyes flickered slightly as they rested on the brown-haired woman in her trim police uniform. Lisa was now an executive official of Precrime but once, Witwer knew, she had been Anderton's secretary.

Noticing the interest on Witwer's face Anderton paused and reflected. To plant the card in the machines would require an accomplice on the inside — someone who was closely connected with Precrime and had access to the analytical equipment. Lisa was an improbable element. But the possibility did exist.

Of course, the conspiracy could be large-scale and elaborate, involving far more than a "rigged" card inserted somewhere along the line. The original data itself might have been tampered with. Actually, there was no telling how far back the alteration went. A cold fear touched him as he began to see the possibilities. His original impulse — to tear open the machines and remove all the data — was uselessly primitive. Probably the tapes agreed with the card: He would only incriminate himself further.

He had approximately twenty-four hours. Then, the Army people would check over their cards and discover the discrepancy. They would find in their files a duplicate of the card he had appropriated. He had only one of two copies, which meant that the folded card in his pocket might just as well be lying on Page's desk in plain view of everyone.

From outside the building came the drone of police cars starting out on their routine round-ups. How many hours would elapse before one of them pulled up in front of *his* house?

"What's the matter, darling?" Lisa asked him uneasily. "You look as if you've just seen a ghost. Are you all right?"

"I'm fine," he assured her.

Lisa suddenly seemed to become aware of Ed Witwer's admiring scrutiny. "Is this gentleman your new co-worker, darling?" she asked.

Warily, Anderton introduced his new associate. Lisa smiled in friendly greeting. Did a covert awareness pass between them? He couldn't tell. God, he was beginning to suspect everybody — not only his wife and Witwer, but a dozen members of his staff.

"Are you from New York?" Lisa asked.

"No," Witwer replied. "I've lived most of my life in Chicago. I'm staying at a hotel — one of the big downtown hotels. Wait — I have the name written on a card somewhere."

While he self-consciously searched his pockets, Lisa suggested: "Perhaps you'd like to have dinner with us. We'll be working in close cooperation, and I really think we ought to get better acquainted."

Startled, Anderton backed off. What were the chances of his wife's friendliness being benign, accidental? Witwer would be present the balance of the evening, and would now have an excuse to trail along to Anderton's private residence. Profoundly disturbed, he turned impulsively, and moved toward the door.

"Where are you going?" Lisa asked, astonished.

“Back to the monkey block,” he told her. “I want to check over some rather puzzling data tapes before the Army sees them.” He was out in the corridor before she could think of a plausible reason for detaining him.

Rapidly, he made his way to the ramp at its far end. He was striding down the outside stairs toward the public sidewalk, when Lisa appeared breathlessly behind him.

“What on earth has come over you?” Catching hold of his arm, she moved quickly in front of him. “I *knew* you were leaving,” she exclaimed, blocking his way. “What’s wrong with you? Everybody thinks you’re — ” She checked herself. “I mean, you’re acting so erratically.”

People surged by them — the usual afternoon crowd. Ignoring them, Anderton pried his wife’s fingers from his arm. “I’m getting out,” he told her. “While there’s still time.”

“But — why?”

“I’m being framed — deliberately and maliciously. This creature is out to get my job. The Senate is getting at me *through* him.”

Lisa gazed up at him, bewildered. “But he seems like such a nice young man.”

“Nice as a water moccasin.”

Lisa’s dismay turned to disbelief. “I don’t believe it. Darling, all this strain you’ve been under — ” Smiling uncertainly, she faltered: “It’s not really credible that Ed Witwer is trying to frame you. How could he, even if he wanted to? Surely Ed wouldn’t — “

“Ed?”

“That’s his name, isn’t it?”

Her brown eyes flashed in startled, wildly incredulous protest. “Good heavens, you’re suspicious of everybody. You actually believe I’m mixed up with it in some way, don’t you?”

He considered. “I’m not sure.”

She drew closer to him, her eyes accusing. “That’s not true. You really believe it. Maybe you *ought* to go away for a few weeks. You desperately need a rest. All this tension and trauma, a younger man coming in. You’re acting paranoiac. Can’t you see that? People plotting against you. Tell me, do you have any actual proof?”

Anderton removed his wallet and took out the folded card. “Examine this carefully,” he said, handing it to her.

The color drained out of her face, and she gave a little harsh, dry gasp.

“The set-up is fairly obvious,” Anderton told her, as levelly as he could. “This will give Witwer a legal pretext to remove me right now. He won’t have to wait until I resign.” Grimly, he added: “They know I’m good for a few years yet.”

“But-”

“It will end the check and balance system. Precrime will no longer be an independent agency. The Senate will control the police, and after that — ” His lips tightened. “They’ll absorb the Army too. Well, it’s outwardly logical enough. *Of course* I feel hostility and resentment toward Witwer — *of course* I have a motive.

“Nobody likes to be replaced by a younger man, and find himself turned out to pasture. It’s all really quite plausible — except that I haven’t the remotest intention of killing Witwer. But I can’t prove that. So what can I do?”

Mutely, her face very white, Lisa shook her head. “I — I don’t know. Darling, if only —”

“Right now,” Anderton said abruptly, “I’m going home to pack my things. That’s about as far ahead as I can plan.”

“You’re really going to — to try to hide out?”

“I am. As far as the Centaurian-colony planets, if necessary. It’s been done successfully before, and I have a twenty-four-hour start.” He turned resolutely. “Go back inside. There’s no point in your coming with me.”

“Did you imagine I would?” Lisa asked huskily.

Startled, Anderton stared at her. “Wouldn’t you?” Then with amazement, he murmured: “No, I can see you don’t believe me. You still think I’m imagining all this.” He jabbed savagely at the card. “Even with that evidence you still aren’t convinced.”

“No,” Lisa agreed quickly, “I’m not. You didn’t look at it closely enough, darling. Ed Witwer’s name isn’t on it.”

Incredulous, Anderton took the card from her.

“Nobody says you’re going to kill Ed Witwer,” Lisa continued rapidly, in a thin, brittle voice. “The card *must* be genuine, understand? And it has nothing to do with Ed. He’s not plotting against you and neither is anybody else.”

Too confused to reply, Anderton stood studying the card. She was right. Ed Witwer was not listed as his victim. On line five, the machine had neatly stamped another name.

LEOPOLD KAPLAN

Numbly, he pocketed the card. He had never heard of the man in his life.

III

The house was cool and deserted, and almost immediately Anderton began making preparations for his journey. While he packed, frantic thoughts passed through his mind.

Possibly he was wrong about Witwer — but how could he be sure? In any event, the conspiracy against him was far more complex than he had realized. Witwer, in the overall picture, might be merely an insignificant puppet animated by someone else — by some distant, indistinct figure only vaguely visible in the background.

It had been a mistake to show the card to Lisa. Undoubtedly, she would describe it in detail to Witwer. He'd never get off Earth, never have an opportunity to find out what life on a frontier planet might be like.

While he was thus preoccupied, a board creaked behind him. He turned from the bed, clutching a weather-stained winter sports jacket, to face the muzzle of a gray-blue A-pistol.

"It didn't take you long," he said, staring with bitterness at the tight-lipped, heavyset man in a brown overcoat who stood holding the gun in his gloved hand. "Didn't she even hesitate?"

The intruder's face registered no response. "I don't know what you're talking about," he said. "Come along with me."

Startled, Anderton laid down the sports jacket. "You're not from my agency? You're not a police officer?"

Protesting and astonished, he was hustled outside the house to a waiting limousine. Instantly three heavily armed men closed in behind him. The

door slammed and the car shot off down the highway, away from the city. Impassive and remote, the faces around him jogged with the motion of the speeding vehicle as open fields, dark and somber, swept past.

Anderton was till trying futilely to grasp the implications of what had happened, when the car came to a rutted side road, turned off, and descended into a gloomy subsurface garage. Someone shouted an order. The heavy metal lock grated shut and overhead lights blinked on. The driver turned off the car motor.

"You'll have reason to regret this," Anderton warned hoarsely, as they dragged him from the car. "Do you realize who I am?"

"We realize," the man in the brown overcoat said.

At gun-point, Anderton was marched upstairs, from the clammy silence of the garage into a deep-carpeted hallway. He was, apparently, in a luxurious private residence, set out in the war-devoured rural area. At the far end of the hallway he could make out a room — a book-lined study simply but tastefully furnished. In a circle of lamplight, his face partly in shadows, a man he had never met sat waiting for him.

As Anderton approached, the man nervously slipped a pair of rimless glasses in place, snapped the case shut, and moistened his dry lips. He was elderly, perhaps seventy or older, and under his arm was a slim silver cane. His body was thin, wiry, his attitude curiously rigid. What little hair he had was dusty brown — a carefully-smoothed sheen of neutral color above his pale, bony skull. Only his eyes seemed really alert.

"Is this Anderton?" he inquired querulously, turning to the man in the brown overcoat. "Where did you pick him up?"

"At his home," the other replied. "He was packing — as we expected."

The man at the desk shivered visibly. “Packing.” He took off his glasses and jerkily returned them to their case. “Look here,” he said bluntly to Anderton, “what’s the matter with you? Are you hopelessly insane? How could you kill a man you’ve never met?”

The old man, Anderton suddenly realized, was Leopold Kaplan.

“First, I’ll ask you a question,” Anderton countered rapidly. “Do you realize what you’ve done? I’m Commissioner of Police. I can have you sent up for twenty years.”

He was going to say more, but a sudden wonder cut him short.

“How did you find out?” he demanded. Involuntarily, his hand went to his pocket, where the folded card was hidden. “It won’t be for another — “

“I wasn’t notified through your agency,” Kaplan broke in, with angry impatience. “The fact that you’ve never heard of me doesn’t surprise me too much. Leopold Kaplan, General of the Army of the Federated Westbloc Alliance.” Begrudgingly, he added. “Retired, since the end of the Anglo-Chinese War, and the abolishment of AFWA.”

It made sense. Anderton had suspected that the Army processed its duplicate cards immediately, for its own protection. Relaxing somewhat, he demanded: “Well? You’ve got me here. What next?”

“Evidently,” Kaplan said, “I’m not going to have you destroyed, or it would have shown up on one of those miserable little cards. I’m curious about you. It seemed incredible to me that a man of your stature could contemplate the cold-blooded murder of a total stranger. There must be something more here. Frankly, I’m puzzled. If it represented some kind of Police strategy-” He shrugged his thin shoulders. “Surely you wouldn’t have permitted the duplicate card to reach us.”

“Unless,” one of his men suggested, “it’s a deliberate plant.”

Kaplan raised his bright, bird-like eyes and scrutinized Anderton. “What do you have to say?”

“That’s exactly what it is,” Anderton said, quick to see the advantage of stating frankly what he believed to be the simple truth. “The prediction on the card was deliberately fabricated by a clique inside the police agency. The card is prepared and I’m netted. I’m relieved of my authority automatically. My assistant steps in and claims he prevented the murder in the usual efficient Precrime manner. Needless to say, there is no murder or intent to murder.”

“I agree with you that there will be no murder,” Kaplan affirmed grimly. “You’ll be in police custody. I intend to make certain of that.”

Horrified, Anderton protested: “You’re taking me back there? If I’m in custody I’ll never be able to prove — “

“I don’t care what you prove or don’t prove,” Kaplan interrupted. “All I’m interested in is having you out of the way.” Frigidly, he added: “For my own protection.”

“He was getting ready to leave,” one of the men asserted.

“That’s right,” Anderton said, sweating. “As soon as they get hold of me I’ll be confined in the detention camp. Witwer will take over — lock, stock and barrel.” His face darkened. “And my wife. They’re acting in concert, apparently.”

For a moment Kaplan seemed to waver. “It’s possible,” he conceded, regarding Anderton steadily. Then he shook his head. “I can’t take the chance. If this is a frame against you, I’m sorry. But it’s simply not my affair.” He smiled slightly. “However, I wish you luck.” To the men he said: “Take him to the police building and turn him over to the highest authority.” He mentioned the name of the acting commissioner, and waited for Anderton’s reaction.

“Witwer!” Anderton echoed, incredulous.

Still smiling slightly, Kaplan turned and clicked on the console radio in the study. “Witwer has already assumed authority. Obviously, he’s going to create quite an affair out of this.”

There was a brief static hum, and then, abruptly, the radio blared out into the room — a noisy professional voice, reading a prepared announcement.

“… all citizens are warned not to shelter or in any fashion aid or assist this dangerous marginal individual. The extraordinary circumstance of an escaped criminal at liberty and in a position to commit an act of violence is unique in modern times. All citizens are hereby notified that legal statutes still in force implicate any and all persons failing to cooperate fully with the police in their task of apprehending John Allison Anderton. To repeat: The Precrime Agency of the Federal Westbloc Government is in the process of locating and neutralizing its former Commissioner, John Allison Anderton, who, through the methodology of the precrime-system, is hereby declared a potential murderer and as such forfeits his rights to freedom and all its privileges.”

“It didn’t take him long,” Anderton muttered, appalled. Kaplan snapped off the radio and the voice vanished.

“Lisa must have gone directly to him,” Anderton speculated bitterly.

“Why should he wait?” Kaplan asked. “You made your intentions clear.”

He nodded to his men. “Take him back to town. I feel uneasy having him so close. In that respect I concur with Commissioner Witwer. I want him neutralized as soon as possible.”

IV

Cold, light rain beat against the pavement, as the car moved through the dark streets of New York City toward the police building.

"You can see his point," one of the men said to Anderton. "If you were in his place you'd act just as decisively."

Sullen and resentful, Anderton stared straight ahead.

"Anyhow," the man went on, "you're just one of many. Thousands of people have gone to that detention camp. You won't be lonely. As a matter of fact, you may not want to leave."

Helplessly, Anderton watched pedestrians hurrying along the rain-swept sidewalks. He felt no strong emotion. He was aware only of an overpowering fatigue. Dully, he checked off the street numbers: they were getting near the police station.

"This Witwer seems to know how to take advantage of an opportunity," one of the men observed conversationally. "Did you ever meet him?"

"Briefly," Anderton answered.

"He wanted your job — so he framed you. Are you sure of that?"

Anderton grimaced. "Does it matter?"

"I was just curious." The man eyed him languidly. "So you're the ex-Commissioner of Police. People in the camp will be glad to see you coming. They'll remember you."

“No doubt,” Anderton agreed.

“Witwer sure didn’t waste any time. Kaplan’s lucky — with an official like that in charge.” The man looked at Anderton almost pleadingly. “You’re really convinced it’s a plot, eh?”

“Of course.”

“You wouldn’t harm a hair of Kaplan’s head? For the first time in history, Precrime goes wrong? An innocent man is framed by one of those cards. Maybe there’ve been other innocent people — right?”

“It’s quite possible,” Anderton admitted listlessly.

“Maybe the whole system can break down. Sure, you’re not going to commit a murder -and maybe none of them were. Is that why you told Kaplan you wanted to keep yourself outside? Were you hoping to prove the system wrong? I’ve got an open mind, if you want to talk about it.”

Another man leaned over, and asked, “Just between the two of us, is there really anything to this plot stuff? Are you really being framed?”

Anderton sighed. At that point he wasn’t certain, himself. Perhaps he was trapped in a closed, meaningless time-circle with no motive and no beginning. In fact, he was almost ready to concede that he was the victim of a weary, neurotic fantasy, spawned by growing insecurity. Without a fight, he was willing to give himself up. A vast weight of exhaustion lay upon him. He was struggling against the impossible — and all the cards were stacked against him.

The sharp squeal of tires roused him. Frantically, the driver struggled to control the car, tugging at the wheel and slamming on the brakes, as a massive bread truck loomed up from the fog and ran directly across the lane ahead. Had he gunned the motor instead he might have saved himself. But

too late he realized his error. The car skidded, lurched, hesitated for a brief instant, and then smashed head on into the bread truck.

Under Anderton the seat lifted up and flung him face-forward against the door. Pain, sudden, intolerable, seemed to burst in his brain as he lay gasping and trying feebly to pull himself to his knees. Somewhere the crackle of fire echoed dismally, a patch of hissing brilliance winking in the swirls of mist making their way into the twisted hulk of the car.

Hands from outside the car reached for him. Slowly he became aware that he was being dragged through the rent that had been the door. A heavy seat cushion was shoved brusquely aside, and all at once he found himself on his feet, leaning heavily against a dark shape and being guided into the shadows of an alley a short distance from the car. In the distance, police sirens wailed.

“You’ll live,” a voice grated in his ear, low and urgent. It was a voice he had never heard before, as unfamiliar and harsh as the rain beating into his face. “Can you hear what I’m saying?”

“Yes,” Anderton acknowledged. He plucked aimlessly at the ripped sleeve of his shirt. A cut on his cheek was beginning to throb. Confused, he tried to orient himself. “You’re not — “

“Stop talking and listen.” The man was heavyset, almost fat. Now his big hands held Anderton propped against the wet brick wall of the building, out of the rain and the flickering light of the burning car. “We had to do it that way,” he said. “It was the only alternative. We didn’t have much time. We thought Kaplan would keep you at his place longer.”

“Who are you?” Anderton managed.

The moist, rain-streaked face twisted into a humorless grin. “My name’s Fleming. You’ll see me again. We have about five seconds before the police get here. Then we’re back where we started.” A flat packet was stuffed into

Anderton's hands. "That's enough loot to keep you going. And there's a full set of identification in there. We'll contact you from time to time." His grin increased and became a nervous chuckle. "Until you've proved your point."

Anderton blinked. "It is a frameup, then?"

"Of course." Sharply, the man swore. "You mean they got you to believe it, too?"

"I thought — " Anderton had trouble talking; one of his front teeth seemed to be loose. "Hostility toward Witwer … replaced, my wife and a younger man, natural resentment. …"

"Don't kid yourself," the other said. "You know better than that. This whole business was worked out carefully. They had every phase of it under control. The card was set to pop the day Witwer appeared. They've already got the first part wrapped up. Witwer is Commissioner, and you're a hunted criminal."

"Who's behind it?"

"Your wife."

Anderton's head spun. "You're positive?"

The man laughed. "You bet your life." He glanced quickly around. "Here come the police. Take off down this alley. Grab a bus, get yourself into the slum section, rent a room and buy a stack of magazines to keep you busy. Get other clothes — You're smart enough to take care of yourself. Don't try to leave Earth. They've got all the intersystem transports screened. If you can keep low for the next seven days, you're made."

"Who are you?" Anderton demanded.

Fleming let go of him. Cautiously, he moved to the entrance of the alley and peered out. The first police car had come to rest on the damp pavement; its motor spinning tinnily, it crept suspiciously toward the smouldering ruin that had been Kaplan's car. Inside the wreck the squad of men were stirring feebly, beginning to creep painfully through the tangle of steel and plastic out into the cold rain.

"Consider us a protective society," Fleming said softly, his plump, expressionless face shining with moisture. "A sort of police force that watches the police. To see," he added, "that everything stays on an even keel."

His thick hand shot out. Stumbling, Anderton was knocked away from him, half-falling into the shadows and damp debris that littered the alley.

"Get going," Fleming told him sharply. "And don't discard that packet." As Anderton felt his way hesitantly toward the far exit of the alley, the man's last words drifted to him. "Study it carefully and you may still survive."

V

The identification cards described him as Ernest Temple, an unemployed electrician, drawing a weekly subsistence from the State of New York, with a wife and four children in Buffalo and less than a hundred dollars in assets. A sweat-stained green card gave him permission to travel and to maintain no fixed address. A man looking for work needed to travel. He might have to go a long way.

As he rode across town in the almost empty bus, Anderton studied the description of Ernest Temple. Obviously, the cards had been made out with him in mind, for all the measurements fitted. After a time he wondered about the fingerprints and the brain-wave pattern. They couldn't possibly stand comparison. The walletful of cards would get him past only the most cursory examinations.

But it was something. And with the ID cards came ten thousand dollars in bills. He pocketed the money and cards, then turned to the neatly-typed message in which they had been enclosed.

At first he could make no sense of it. For a long time he studied it, perplexed.

The existence of a majority logically implies a corresponding minority.

The bus had entered the vast slum region, the tumbled miles of cheap hotels and broken-down tenements that had sprung up after the mass destruction of the war. It slowed to a stop, and Anderton got to his feet. A few passengers idly observed his cut cheek and damaged clothing. Ignoring them, he stepped down onto the rain-swept curb.

Beyond collecting the money due him, the hotel clerk was not interested. Anderton climbed the stairs to the second floor and entered the

narrow, musty-smelling room that now belonged to him. Gratefully, he locked the door and pulled down the window shades. The room was small but clean. Bed, dresser, scenic calendar, chair, lamp, a radio with a slot for the insertion of quarters.

He dropped a quarter into it and threw himself heavily down on the bed. All main stations carried the police bulletin. It was novel, exciting, something unknown to the present generation. An escaped criminal! The public was avidly interested.

"… this man has used the advantage of his high position to carry out an initial escape," the announcer was saying, with professional indignation. "Because of his high office he had access to the previewed data and the trust placed in him permitted him to evade the normal process of detection and re-location. During the period of his tenure he exercised his authority to send countless potentially guilty individuals to their proper confinement, thus sparing the lives of innocent victims. This man, John Allison Anderton, was instrumental in the original creation of the Precrime system, the prophylactic pre-detection of criminals through the ingenious use of mutant precogs, capable of previewing future events and transferring orally that data to analytical machinery. These three precogs, in their vital function…."

The voice faded out as he left the room and entered the tiny bathroom. There, he stripped off his coat, and shirt, and ran hot water in the wash bowl. He began bathing the cut on his cheek. At the drugstore on the corner he had bought iodine and Band-aids, a razor, comb, toothbrush, and other small things he would need. The next morning he intended to find a second-hand clothing store and buy more suitable clothing. After all, he was now an unemployed electrician, not an accident-damaged Commissioner of Police.

In the other room the radio blared on. Only subconsciously aware of it, he stood in front of the cracked mirror, examining a broken tooth.

"… the system of three precogs finds its genesis in the computers of the middle decades of this century. How are the results of an electronic computer checked? By feeding the data to a second computer of identical design. But two computers are not sufficient. If each computer arrived at a different answer it is impossible to tell *a priori* which is correct. The solution, based on a careful study of statistical method, is to utilize a third computer to check the results of the first two. In this manner, a so-called majority report is obtained. It can be assumed with fair probability that the agreement of two out of three computers indicates which of the alternative results is accurate. It would not be likely that two computers would arrive at identically incorrect solutions — "

Anderton dropped the towel he was clutching and raced into the other room. Trembling, he bent to catch the blaring words of the radio.

"… unanimity of all three precogs is a hoped-for but seldom-achieved phenomenon, acting-Commissioner Witwer explains. It is much more common to obtain a collaborative majority report of two precogs, plus a minority report of some slight variation, usually with reference to time and place, from the third mutant. This is explained by the theory of *multiple-futures.* If only one time-path existed, precognitive information would be of no importance, since no possibility would exist, in possessing this information, of altering the future. In the Precrime Agency's work we must first of all assume — "

Frantically, Anderton paced around the tiny room. Majority report — only two of the precogs had concurred on the material underlying the card. That was the meaning of the message enclosed with the packet. The report of the third precog, the minority report, was somehow of importance.

Why?

His watch told him that it was after midnight. Page would be off duty. He wouldn't be back in the monkey block until the next afternoon. It was a slim chance, but worth taking. Maybe Page would cover for him, and maybe not. He would have to risk it.

He had to see the minority report.

VI

Between noon and one o’clock the rubbish-littered streets swarmed with people. He chose that time, the busiest part of the day, to make his call. Selecting a phonebooth in a patron-teeming super drugstore, he dialed the familiar police number and stood holding the cold receiver to his ear. Deliberately, he had selected the aud, not the vid line: in spite of his second-hand clothing and seedy, unshaven appearance, he might be recognized.

The receptionist was new to him. Cautiously, he gave Page’s extension. If Witwer were removing the regular staff and putting in his satellites, he might find himself talking to a total stranger.

“Hello,” Page’s gruff voice came.

Relieved, Anderton glanced around. Nobody was paying any attention to him. The shoppers wandered among the merchandise, going about their daily routines. “Can you talk?” he asked. “Or are you tied up?”

There was a moment of silence. He could picture Page’s mild face torn with uncertainty as he wildly tried to decide what to do. At last came halting words. “Why — are you calling here?”

Ignoring the question, Anderton said, “I didn’t recognize the receptionist. New personnel?”

“Brand-new,” Page agreed, in a thin, strangled voice. “Big turnovers, these days.”

“So I hear.” Tensely, Anderton asked, “How’s your job? Still safe?”

“Wait a minute.” The receiver was put down and the muffled sound of steps came in Anderton’s ear. It was followed by the quick slam of a door

being hastily shut. Page returned. “We can talk better now,” he said hoarsely.

“How much better?”

“Not a great deal. Where are you?”

“Strolling through Central Park,” Anderton said. “Enjoying the sunlight.” For all he knew, Page had gone to make sure the line-tap was in place. Right now, an airborne police team was probably on its way. But he had to take the chance. “I’m in a new field,” he said curtly. “I’m an electrician these days.”

“Oh?” Page said, baffled.

“I thought maybe you had some work for me. If it can be arranged, I’d like to drop by and examine your basic computing equipment. Especially the data and analytical banks in the monkey block.”

After a pause, Page said: “It — might be arranged. If it’s really important.”

“It is,” Anderton assured him. “When would be best for you?”

“Well,” Page said, struggling. “I’m having a repair team come in to look at the intercom equipment. The acting-Commissioner wants it improved, so he can operate quicker. You might trail along.”

“I’ll do that. About when?”

“Say four o’clock. Entrance B, level 6. I’ll meet you.”

“Fine,” Anderton agreed, already starting to hang up. “I hope you’re still in charge, when I get there.”

He hung up and rapidly left the booth. A moment later he was pushing through the dense pack of people crammed into the nearby cafeteria. Nobody would locate him there.

He had three and a half hours to wait. And it was going to seem a lot longer. It proved to be the longest wait of his life before he finally met Page as arranged.

The first thing Page said was: “You’re out of your mind. Why in hell did you come back?”

“I’m not back for long.” Tautly, Anderton prowled around the monkey block, systematically locking one door after another. “Don’t let anybody in. I can’t take chances.”

“You should have quit when you were ahead.” In an agony of apprehension, Page followed after him. “Witwer is making hay, hand over fist. He’s got the whole country screaming for your blood.”

Ignoring him, Anderton snapped open the main control bank of the analytical machinery. “Which of the three monkeys gave the minority report?”

“Don’t question me — I’m getting out.” On his way to the door Page halted briefly, pointed to the middle figure, and then disappeared. The door closed; Anderton was alone.

The middle one. He knew that one well. The dwarfed, hunched-over figure had sat buried in its wiring and relays for fifteen years. As Anderton approached, it didn’t look up. With eyes glazed and blank, it contemplated a world that did not yet exist, blind to the physical reality that lay around it.

“Jerry” was twenty-four years old. Originally, he had been classified as a hydrocephalic idiot but when he reached the age of six the psych testers had identified the precog talent, buried under the layers of tissue corrosion.

Placed in a government-operated training school, the latent talent had been cultivated. By the time he was nine the talent had advanced to a useful stage. “Jerry,” however, remained in the aimless chaos of idiocy; the burgeoning faculty had absorbed the totality of his personality.

Squatting down, Anderton began disassembling the protective shields that guarded the tape-reels stored in the analytical machinery. Using schematics, he traced the leads back from the final stages of the integrated computers, to the point where “Jerry’s” individual equipment branched off. Within minutes he was shakily lifting out two half-hour tapes: recent rejected data not fused with majority reports. Consulting the code chart, he selected the section of tape which referred to his particular card.

A tape scanner was mounted nearby. Holding his breath, he inserted the tape, activated the transport, and listened. It took only a second. From the first statement of the report it was clear what had happened. He had what he wanted; he could stop looking.

“Jerry’s” vision was misphased. Because of the erratic nature of precognition, he was examining a time-area slightly different from that of his companions. For him, the report that Anderton would commit a murder was an event to be integrated along with everything else. That assertion — and Anderton’s reaction — was one more piece of datum.

Obviously, “Jerry’s” report superseded the majority report. Having been informed that he would commit a murder, Anderton would change his mind and not do so. The preview of the murder had cancelled out the murder; prophylaxis had occurred simply in his being informed. Already, a new time-path had been created. But “Jerry” was outvoted.

Trembling, Anderton rewound the tape and clicked on the recording head. At high speed he made a copy of the report, restored the original, and removed the duplicate from the transport. Here was the proof that the card was invalid: *obsolete.* All he had to do was show it to Witwer….

His own stupidity amazed him. Undoubtedly, Witwer had seen the report; and in spite of it, had assumed the job of Commissioner, had kept the police teams out. Witwer didn't intend to back down; he wasn't concerned with Anderton's innocence.

What, then, could he do? Who else would be interested?

"You damn fool!" a voice behind him grated, wild with anxiety.

Quickly, he turned. His wife stood at one of the doors, in her police uniform, her eyes frantic with dismay. "Don't worry," he told her briefly, displaying the reel of tape. "I'm leaving."

Her face distorted, Lisa rushed frantically up to him. "Page said you were here, but I couldn't believe it. He shouldn't have let you in. He just doesn't understand what you are."

"What am I?" Anderton inquired caustically. "Before you answer, maybe you better listen to this tape."

"I don't want to listen to it! I just want you to get out of here! Ed Witwer knows somebody's down here. Page is trying to keep him occupied, but — " She broke off, her head turned stiffly to one side. "He's here now! He's going to force his way in."

"Haven't you got any influence? Be gracious and charming. He'll probably forget about me."

Lisa looked at him in bitter reproach. "There's a ship parked on the roof. If you want to get away…." Her voice choked and for an instant she was silent. Then she said, "I'll be taking off in a minute or so. If you want to come — "

“I’ll come,” Anderton said. He had no other choice. He had secured his tape, his proof, but he hadn’t worked out any method of leaving. Gladly, he hurried after the slim figure of his wife as she strode from the block, through a side door and down a supply corridor, her heels clicking loudly in the deserted gloom.

“It’s a good fast ship,” she told him over her shoulder. “It’s emergency-fueled — ready to go. I was going to supervise some of the teams.”

VII

Behind the wheel of the high-velocity police cruiser, Anderton outlined what the minority report tape contained. Lisa listened without comment, her face pinched and strained, her hands clasped tensely in her lap. Below the ship, the war-ravaged rural countryside spread out like a relief map, the vacant regions between cities crater-pitted and dotted with the ruins of farms and small industrial plants.

"I wonder," she said, when he had finished, "how many times this has happened before."

"A minority report? A great many times."

"I mean, one precog misphased. Using the report of the others as data — superseding them." Her eyes dark and serious, she added, "Perhaps a lot of the people in the camps are like you."

"No," Anderton insisted. But he was beginning to feel uneasy about it, too. "I was in a position to see the card, to get a look at the report. That's what did it."

"But-" Lisa gestured significantly. "Perhaps all of them would have reacted that way. We could have told them the truth."

"It would have been too great a risk," he answered stubbornly.

Lisa laughed sharply. "Risk? Chance? Uncertainty? With precogs around?"

Anderton concentrated on steering the fast little ship. "This is a unique case," he repeated. "And we have an immediate problem. We can tackle the

theoretical aspects later on. I have to get this tape to the proper people — before your bright young friend demolishes it."

"You're taking it to Kaplan?"

"I certainly am." He tapped the reel of tape which lay on the seat between them. "He'll be interested. Proof that his life isn't in danger ought to be of vital concern to him."

From her purse, Lisa shakily got out her cigarette case. "And you think he'll help you."

"He may — or he may not. It's a chance worth taking."

"How did you manage to go underground so quickly?" Lisa asked. "A completely effective disguise is difficult to obtain."

"All it takes is money," he answered evasively.

As she smoked, Lisa pondered. "Probably Kaplan will protect you," she said. "He's quite powerful."

"I thought he was only a retired general."

"Technically — that's what he is. But Witwer got out the dossier on him. Kaplan heads an unusual kind of exclusive veterans' organization. It's actually a kind of club, with a few restricted members. High officers only — an international class from both sides of the war. Here in New York they maintain a great mansion of a house, three glossy-paper publications, and occasional TV coverage that costs them a small fortune."

"What are you trying to say?"

“Only this. You’ve convinced me that you’re innocent. I mean, it’s obvious that you *won’t* commit a murder. But you must realize now that the original report, the majority report, *was not a fake*. Nobody falsified it. Ed Witwer didn’t create it. There’s no plot against you, and there never was. If you’re going to accept this minority report as genuine you’ll have to accept the majority one, also.”

Reluctantly, he agreed. “I suppose so.”

“Ed Witwer,” Lisa continued, “is acting in complete good faith. He really believes you’re a potential criminal — and why not? He’s got the majority report sitting on his desk, but you have that card folded up in your pocket.”

“I destroyed it,” Anderton said, quietly.

Lisa leaned earnestly toward him. “Ed Witwer isn’t motivated by any desire to get your job,” she said. “He’s motivated by the same desire that has always dominated you. He believes in Precrime. He wants the system to continue. I’ve talked to him and I’m convinced he’s telling the truth.”

Anderton asked, “Do you want me to take this reel to Witwer? If I do — he’ll destroy it.”

“Nonsense,” Lisa retorted. “The originals have been in his hands from the start. He could have destroyed them any time he wished.”

“That’s true.” Anderton conceded. “Quite possibly he didn’t know.”

“Of course he didn’t. Look at it this way. If Kaplan gets hold of that tape, the police will be discredited. Can’t you see why? It would prove that the majority report was an error. Ed Witwer is absolutely right. You have to be taken in — if Precrime is to survive. You’re thinking of your own safety. But think, for a moment, about the system.” Leaning over, she stubbed out

her cigarette and fumbled in her purse for another. “Which means more to you — your own personal safety or the existence of the system?”

“My safety,” Anderton answered, without hesitation.

“You’re positive?”

“If the system can survive only by imprisoning innocent people, then it deserves to be destroyed. My personal safety is important because I’m a human being. And furthermore — “

From her purse, Lisa got out an incredibly tiny pistol. “I believe,” she told him huskily, “that I have my finger on the firing release. I’ve never used a weapon like this before. But I’m willing to try.”

After a pause, Anderton asked: “You want me to turn the ship around? Is that it?”

“Yes, back to the police building. I’m sorry. If you could put the good of the system above your own selfish — “

“Keep your sermon,” Anderton told her. “I’ll take the ship back. But I’m not going to listen to your defense of a code of behavior no intelligent man could subscribe to.”

Lisa’s lips pressed into a thin, bloodless line. Holding the pistol tightly, she sat facing him, her eyes fixed intently on him as he swung the ship in a broad arc. A few loose articles rattled from the glove compartment as the little craft turned on a radical slant, one wing rising majestically until it pointed straight up.

Both Anderton and his wife were supported by the constraining metal arms of their seats. But not so the third member of the party.

Out of the corner of his eye, Anderton saw a flash of motion. A sound came simultaneously, the clawing struggle of a large man as he abruptly lost his footing and plunged into the reinforced wall of the ship. What followed happened quickly. Fleming scrambled instantly to his feet, lurching and wary, one arm lashing out for the woman's pistol. Anderton was too startled to cry out. Lisa turned, saw the man — and screamed. Fleming knocked the gun from her hand, sending it clattering to the floor.

Grunting, Fleming shoved her aside and retrieved the gun. "Sorry," he gasped, straightening up as best he could. "I thought she might talk more. That's why I waited."

"You were here when — " Anderton began — and stopped. It was obvious that Fleming and his men had kept him under surveillance. The existence of Lisa's ship had been duly noted and factored in, and while Lisa had debated whether it would be wise to fly him to safety, Fleming had crept into the storage compartment of the ship.

"Perhaps," Fleming said, "you'd better give me that reel of tape." His moist, clumsy fingers groped for it. "You're right — Witwer would have melted it down to a puddle."

"Kaplan, too?" Anderton asked numbly, still dazed by the appearance of the man.

"Kaplan is working directly with Witwer. That's why his name showed on line five of the card. Which one of them is the actual boss, we can't tell. Possibly neither." Fleming tossed the tiny pistol away and got out his own heavyduty military weapon. "You pulled a real flub in taking off with this woman. I told you she was back of the whole thing."

"I can't believe that," Anderton protested. "If she — "

"You've got no sense. This ship was warmed up by Witwer's order. They wanted to fly you out of the building so that we couldn't get to you. With you on your own, separated from us, you didn't stand a chance."

A strange look passed over Lisa's stricken features. "It's not true," she whispered. "Witwer never saw this ship. I was going to supervise — "

"You almost got away with it," Fleming interrupted inexorably. "We'll be lucky if a police patrol ship isn't hanging on us. There wasn't time to check." He squatted down as he spoke, directly behind the woman's chair. "The first thing is to get this woman out of the way. We'll have to drag you completely out of this area. Page tipped off Witwer on your new disguise, and you can be sure it has been widely broadcast."

Still crouching, Fleming seized hold of Lisa. Tossing his heavy gun to Anderton, he expertly tilted her chin up until her temple was shoved back against the seat. Lisa clawed frantically at him; a thin, terrified wail rose in her throat. Ignoring her, Fleming closed his great hands around her neck and began relentlessly to squeeze.

"No bullet wound," he explained, gasping. "She's going to fall out — natural accident. It happens all the time. But in this case, her neck will be broken *first*."

It seemed strange that Anderton waited so long. As it was, Fleming's thick ringers were cruelly embedded in the woman's pale flesh before he lifted the butt of the heavyduty pistol and brought it down on the back of Fleming's skull. The monstrous hands relaxed. Staggered, Fleming's head fell forward and he sagged against the wall of the ship. Trying feebly to collect himself, he began dragging his body upward. Anderton hit him again, this time above the left eye. He fell back, and lay still.

Struggling to breathe, Lisa remained for a moment huddled over, her body swaying back and forth. Then, gradually, the color crept back into her face.

"Can you take the controls?" Anderton asked, shaking her, his voice urgent.

“Yes, I think so.” Almost mechanically she reached for the wheel. “I’ll be all right. Don’t worry about me.”

“This pistol,” Anderton said, “is Army ordnance issue. But it’s not from the war. It’s one of the useful new ones they’ve developed. I could be a long way off but there’s just a chance — “

He climbed back to where Fleming lay spread out on the deck. Trying not to touch the man’s head, he tore open his coat and rummaged in his pockets. A moment later Fleming’s sweat-sodden wallet rested in his hands.

Tod Fleming, according to his identification, was an Army Major attached to the Internal Intelligence Department of Military Information. Among the various papers was a document signed by General Leopold Kaplan, stating that Fleming was under the special protection of his own group — the International Veterans’ League.

Fleming and his men were operating under Kaplan’s orders. The bread truck, the accident, had been deliberately rigged.

It meant that Kaplan had deliberately kept him out of police hands. The plan went back to the original contact in his home, when Kaplan’s men had picked him up as he was packing. Incredulous, he realized what had really happened. Even then, they were making sure they got him before the police. From the start, it had been an elaborate strategy to make certain that Witwer would fail to arrest him.

“You were telling the truth,” Anderton said to his wife, as he climbed back in the seat. “Can we get hold of Witwer?”

Mutely, she nodded. Indicating the communications circuit of the dashboard, she asked: “What — did you find?”

“Get Witwer for me. I want to talk to him as soon as I can. It’s very urgent.”

Jerkily, she dialed, got the closed-channel mechanical circuit, and raised police headquarters in New York. A visual panorama of petty police officials flashed by before a tiny replica of Ed Witwer's features appeared on the screen.

"Remember me?" Anderton asked him.

Witwer blanched. "Good God. What happened? Lisa, are you bringing him in?" Abruptly his eyes fastened on the gun in Anderton's hands. "Look," he said savagely, "don't do anything to her. Whatever you may think, she's not responsible."

"I've already found that out," Anderton answered. "Can you get a fix on us? We may need protection getting back."

"Back!" Witwer gazed at him unbelievingly. "You're coming in? You're giving yourself up?"

"I am, yes." Speaking rapidly, urgently, Anderton added, "There's something you must do immediately. Close off the monkey block. Make certain nobody gets it — Page or anyone else. *Especially Army people."*

"Kaplan," the miniature image said.

"What about him?"

"He was here. He — he just left."

Anderton's heart stopped beating. "What was he doing?"

"Picking up data. Transcribing duplicates of our precog reports on you. He insisted he wanted them solely for his protection."

"Then he's already got it," Anderton said. "It's too late."

Alarmed, Witwer almost shouted: “Just what do you mean? What’s happening?”

“I’ll tell you,” Anderton said heavily, “when I get back to my office.”

VIII

Witwer met him on the roof on the police building. As the small ship came to rest, a cloud of escort ships dipped their fins and sped off. Anderton immediately approached the blond-haired young man.

"You've got what you wanted," he told him. "You can lock me up, and send me to the detention camp. But that won't be enough."

Witwer's blue eyes were pale with uncertainty. "I'm afraid I don't understand — "

"It's not my fault. I should never have left the police building. Where's Wally Page?"

"We've already clamped down on him," Witwer replied. "He won't give us any trouble."

Anderton's face was grim.

"You're holding him for the wrong reason," he said. "Letting me into the monkey block was no crime. But passing information to Army is. You've had an Army plant working here." He corrected himself, a little lamely, "I mean, I have."

"I've called back the order on you. Now the teams are looking for Kaplan."

"Any luck?"

"He left here in an Army truck. We followed him, but the truck got into a militarized Barracks. Now they've got a big wartime R-3 tank blocking

the street. It would be civil war to move it aside."

Slowly, hesitantly, Lisa made her way from the ship. She was still pale and shaken and on her throat an ugly bruise was forming.

"What happened to you?" Witwer demanded. Then he caught sight of Fleming's inert form lying spread out inside. Facing Anderton squarely, he said: "Then you've finally stopped pretending this is some conspiracy of mine."

"I have."

"You don't think I'm — " He made a disgusted face. "*Plotting* to get your job."

"Sure you are. Everybody is guilty of that sort of thing. And I'm plotting to keep it. But this is something else — and you're not responsible."

"Why do you assert," Witwer inquired, "that it's too late to turn yourself in? My God, we'll put you in the camp. The week will pass and Kaplan will still be alive."

"He'll be alive, yes," Anderton conceded. "But he can prove he'd be just as alive if I were walking the streets. He has the information that proves the majority report obsolete. He can break the Precrime system." He finished, "Heads or tails, he wins — and we lose. The Army discredits us; their strategy paid off."

"But why are they risking so much? What exactly do they want?"

"After the Anglo-Chinese War, the Army lost out. It isn't what it was in the good old AFWA days. They ran the complete show, both military and domestic. And they did their own police work."

“Like Fleming,” Lisa said faintly.

“After the war, the Westbloc was demilitarized. Officers like Kaplan were retired and discarded. Nobody likes that.” Anderton grimaced. “I can sympathize with him. He’s not the only one. But we couldn’t keep on running things that way. We had to divide up the authority.”

“You say Kaplan has won,” Witwer said. “Isn’t there anything we can do?”

“I’m not going to kill him. We know it and he knows it. Probably he’ll come around and offer us some kind of deal. We’ll continue to function, but the Senate will abolish our real pull. You wouldn’t like that, would you?”

“I should say not,” Witwer answered emphatically. “One of these days I’m going to be running this agency.” He flushed. “Not immediately, of course.”

Anderton’s expression was somber. “It’s too bad you publicized the majority report. If you had kept it quiet, we could cautiously draw it back in. But everybody’s heard about it. We can’t retract it now.”

“I guess not,” Witwer admitted awkwardly. “Maybe I — don’t have this job down as neatly as I imagined.”

“You will, in time. You’ll be a good police officer. You believe in the status quo. But learn to take it easy.” Anderton moved away from them. “I’m going to study the data tapes of the majority report. I want to find out exactly how I was supposed to kill Kaplan.” Reflectively, he finished: “It might give me some ideas.”

The data tapes of the precogs “Donna” and “Mike” were separately stored. Choosing the machinery responsible for the analysis of “Donna,” he opened the protective shield and laid out the contents. As before, the code

informed him which reels were relevant and in a moment he had the tape-transport mechanism in operation.

It was approximately what he had suspected. This was the material utilized by “Jerry” — the superseded time-path. In it Kaplan’s Military Intelligence agents kidnapped Anderton as he drove home from work. Taken to Kaplan’s villa, the organization GHQ of the International Veterans’ League. Anderton was given an ultimatum: voluntarily disband the Precrime system or face open hostilities with Army.

In this discarded time-path, Anderton, as Police Commissioner, had turned to the Senate for support. No support was forthcoming. To avoid civil war, the Senate had ratified the dismemberment of the police system, and decreed a return to military law “to cope with the emergency.” Taking a corps of fanatic police, Anderton had located Kaplan and shot him, along with other officials of the Veterans’ League. Only Kaplan had died. The others had been patched up. And the coup had been successful.

This was “Donna.” He rewound the tape and turned to the material previewed by “Mike.” It would be identical; both precogs had combined to present a unified picture. “Mike” began as “Donna” had begun: Anderton had become aware of Kaplan’s plot against the police. But something was wrong. Puzzled, he ran the tape back to the beginning. Incomprehensibly, it didn’t jibe. Again he relayed the tape, listening intently.

The “Mike” report was quite different from the “Donna” report. An hour later, he had finished his examination, put away the tapes, and left the monkey block. As soon as he emerged, Witwer asked. “What’s the matter? I can see something’s wrong.”

“No,” Anderton answered slowly, still deep in thought. “Not exactly wrong.” A sound came to his ears. He walked vaguely over to the window and peered out.

The street was crammed with people. Moving down the center lane was a four-column line of uniformed troops. Rifles, helmets … marching

soldiers in their dingy wartime uniforms, carrying the cherished pennants of AFWA flapping in the cold afternoon wind.

“An Army rally,” Witwer explained bleakly. “I was wrong. They’re not going to make a deal with us. Why should they? Kaplan’s going to make it public.”

Anderton felt no surprise. “He’s going to read the minority report?”

“Apparently. They’re going to demand the Senate disband us, and take away our authority. They’re going to claim we’ve been arresting innocent men — nocturnal police raids, that sort of thing. Rule by terror.”

“You suppose the Senate will yield?”

Witwer hesitated. “I wouldn’t want to guess.”

“I’ll guess,” Anderton said. “They will. That business out there fits with what I learned downstairs. We’ve got ourselves boxed in and there’s only one direction we can go. Whether we like it or not, we’ll have to take it.” His eyes had a steely glint.

Apprehensively, Witwer asked: “What is it?”

“Once I say it, you’ll wonder why you didn’t invent it. Very obviously, I’m going to have to fulfill the publicized report. I’m going to have to kill Kaplan. That’s the only way we can keep them from discrediting us.”

“But,” Witwer said, astonished, “the majority report has been superseded.”

“I can do it,” Anderton informed him, “but it’s going to cost. You’re familiar with the statutes governing first-degree murder?”

“Life imprisonment.”

“At least. Probably, you could pull a few wires and get it commuted to exile. I could be sent to one of the colony planets, the good old frontier.”

“Would you — prefer that?”

“Hell, no,” Anderton said heartily. “But it would be the lesser of the two evils. And it’s got to be done.”

“I don’t see how you can kill Kaplan.”

Anderton got out the heavyduty military weapon Fleming had tossed to him. “I’ll use this.”

“They won’t stop you?”

“Why should they? They’ve got that minority report that says I’ve changed my mind.”

“Then the minority report is incorrect?”

“No,” Anderton said, “it’s absolutely correct. But I’m going to murder Kaplan anyhow.”

IX

He had never killed a man. He had never even seen a man killed. And he had been Police Commissioner for thirty years. For this generation, deliberate murder had died out. It simply didn't happen.

A police car carried him to within a block of the Army rally. There, in the shadows of the back seat, he painstakingly examined the pistol Fleming had provided him. It seemed to be intact. Actually, there was no doubt of the outcome. He was absolutely certain of what would happen within the next half hour. Putting the pistol back together, he opened the door of the parked car and stepped warily out.

Nobody paid the slightest attention to him. Surging masses of people pushed eagerly forward, trying to get within hearing distance of the rally. Army uniforms predominated and at the perimeter of the cleared area, a line of tanks and major weapons was displayed — formidable armament still in production.

Army had erected a metal speaker's stand and ascending steps. Behind the stand hung the vast AFWA banner, emblem of the combined powers that had fought in the war. By a curious corrosion of time, the AFWA Veterans' League included officers from the wartime enemy. But a general was a general and fine distinctions had faded over the years.

Occupying the first rows of seats sat the high brass of the AFWA command. Behind them came junior commissioned officers. Regimental banners swirled in a variety of colors and symbols. In fact, the occasion had taken on the aspect of a festive pageant. On the raised stand itself sat stern-faced dignitaries of the Veterans' League, all of them tense with expectancy. At the extreme edges, almost unnoticed, waited a few police units, ostensibly to keep order. Actually, they were informants making observations. If order were kept, the Army would maintain it.

The late-afternoon wind carried the muffled booming of many people packed tightly together. As Anderton made his way through the dense mob he was engulfed by the solid presence of humanity. An eager sense of anticipation held everybody rigid. The crowd seemed to sense that something spectacular was on the way. With difficulty, Anderton forced his way past the rows of seats and over to the tight knot of Army officials at the edge of the platform. Kaplan was among them. But he was now General Kaplan. The vest, the gold pocket watch, the cane, the conservative business suit — all were gone. For this event, Kaplan had got his old uniform from its mothballs. Straight and impressive, he stood surrounded by what had been his general staff. He wore his service bars, his medals, his boots, his decorative short-sword, and his visored cap. It was amazing how transformed a bald man became under the stark potency of an officer's peaked and visored cap.

Noticing Anderton, General Kaplan broke away from the group and strode to where the younger man was standing. The expression on his thin, mobile countenance showed how incredulously glad he was to see the Commissioner of Police.

"This is a surprise," he informed Anderton, holding out his small gray-gloved hand. "It was my impression you had been taken in by the acting Commissioner."

"I'm still out," Anderton answered shortly, shaking hands. "After all, Witwer has that same reel of tape." He indicated the package Kaplan clutched in his steely fingers and met the man's gaze confidently.

In spite of his nervousness, General Kaplan was in good humor. "This is a great occasion for the Army," he revealed. "You'll be glad to hear I'm going to give the public a full account of the spurious charge brought against you."

"Fine," Anderton answered noncommittally.

“It will be made clear that you were unjustly accused.” General Kaplan was trying to discover what Anderton knew. “Did Fleming have an opportunity to acquaint you with the situation?”

“To some degree,” Anderton replied. “You’re going to read only the minority report? That’s all you’ve got there?”

“I’m going to compare it to the majority report.” General Kaplan signalled an aide and a leather briefcase was produced. “Everything is here — all the evidence we need,” he said. “You don’t mind being an example, do you? Your case symbolizes the unjust arrests of countless individuals.” Stiffly, General Kaplan examined his wristwatch. “I must begin. Will you join me on the platform?”

“Why?”

Coldly, but with a kind of repressed vehemence, General Kaplan said: “So they can see the living proof. You and I together — the killer and his victim. Standing side by side, exposing the whole sinister fraud which the police have been operating.”

“Gladly,” Anderton agreed. “What are we waiting for?”

Disconcerted, General Kaplan moved toward the platform. Again, he glanced uneasily at Anderton, as if visibly wondering why he had appeared and what he really knew. His uncertainty grew as Anderton willingly mounted the steps of the platform and found himself a seat directly beside the speaker’s podium.

“You fully comprehend what I’m going to be saying?” General Kaplan demanded. “The exposure will have considerable repercussions. It may cause the Senate to reconsider the basic validity of the Precrime system.”

“I understand,” Anderton answered, arms folded. “Let’s go.”

A hush had descended on the crowd. But there was a restless, eager stirring when General Kaplan obtained the briefcase and began arranging his material in front of him.

"The man sitting at my side," he began, in a clean, clipped voice, "is familiar to you all. You may be surprised to see him, for until recently he was described by the police as a dangerous killer."

The eyes of the crowd focused on Anderton. Avidly, they peered at the only potential killer they had ever been privileged to see at close range.

"Within the last few hours, however," General Kaplan continued, "the police order for his arrest has been cancelled; because former Commissioner Anderton voluntarily gave himself up? No, that is not strictly accurate. He is sitting here. He has not given himself up, but the police are no longer interested in him. John Allison Anderton is innocent of any crime in the past, present, and future. The allegations against him were patent frauds, diabolical distortions of a contaminated penal system based on a false premise — a vast, impersonal engine of destruction grinding men and women to their doom."

Fascinated, the crowd glanced from Kaplan to Anderton. Everyone was familiar with the basic situation.

"Many men have been seized and imprisoned under the so-called prophylactic Precrime structure," General Kaplan continued, his voice gaining feeling and strength. "Accused not of crimes they have committed, *but of crimes they will commit.* It is asserted that these men, if allowed to remain free, will at some future time commit felonies."

"But there can be no valid knowledge about the future. As soon as precognitive information is obtained, *it cancels itself out.* The assertion that this man will commit a future crime is paradoxical. The very act of possessing this data renders it spurious. In every case, without exception, the report of the three police precogs has invalidated their own data. If no arrests had been made, there would still have been no crimes committed."

Anderton listened idly, only half-hearing the words. The crowd, however, listened with great interest. General Kaplan was now gathering up a summary made from the minority report. He explained what it was and how it had come into existence.

From his coat pocket, Anderton slipped out his gun and held it in his lap. Already, Kaplan was laying aside the minority report, the precognitive material obtained from “Jerry.” His lean, bony fingers groped for the summary of first, “Donna,” and after that, “Mike.”

“This was the original majority report,” he explained. “The assertion, made by the first two precogs, that Anderton would commit a murder. Now here is the automatically invalidated material. I shall read it to you.” He whipped out his rimless glasses, fitted them to his nose, and started slowly to read.

A queer expression appeared on his face. He halted, stammered, and abruptly broke off. The papers fluttered from his hands. Like a cornered animal, he spun, crouched, and dashed from the speaker’s stand.

For an instant his distorted face flashed past Anderton. On his feet now, Anderton raised the gun, stepped quickly forward, and fired. Tangled up in the rows of feet projecting from the chairs that filled the platform, Kaplan gave a single shrill shriek of agony and fright. Like a ruined bird, he tumbled, fluttering and flailing, from the platform to the ground below. Anderton stepped to the railing, but it was already over.

Kaplan, as the majority report had asserted, was dead. His thin chest was a smoking cavity of darkness, crumbling ash that broke loose as the body lay twitching. Sickened, Anderton turned away, and moved quickly between the rising figures of stunned Army officers. The gun, which he still held, guaranteed that he would not be interfered with. He leaped from the platform and edged into the chaotic mass of people at its base. Stricken, horrified, they struggled to see what had happened. The incident, occurring

before their very eyes, was incomprehensible. It would take time for acceptance to replace blind terror.

At the periphery of the crowd, Anderton was seized by the waiting police. “You’re lucky to get out,” one of them whispered to him as the car crept cautiously ahead.

“I guess I am,” Anderton replied remotely. He settled back and tried to compose himself. He was trembling and dizzy. Abruptly, he leaned forward and was violently sick.

“The poor devil,” one the cops murmured sympathetically.

Through the swirls of misery and nausea, Anderton was unable to tell whether the cop was referring to Kaplan or to himself.

Four burly policemen assisted Lisa and John Anderton in the packing and loading of their possessions. In fifty years, the ex-Commissioner of Police had accumulated a vast collection of material goods. Somber and pensive, he stood watching the procession of crates on their way to the waiting trucks.

By truck they would go directly to the field — and from there to Centaurus X by intersystem transport. A long trip for an old man. But he wouldn’t have to make it back.

“There goes the second from the last crate,” Lisa declared, absorbed and preoccupied by the task. In sweater and slacks, she roamed through the barren rooms, checking on last-minute details. “I suppose we won’t be able to use these new atronic appliances. They’re still using electricity on Centten.”

“I hope you don’t care too much,” Anderton said.

“We’ll get used to it,” Lisa replied, and gave him a fleeting smile. “Won’t we?”

“I hope so. You’re positive you’ll have no regrets. If I thought- “

“No regrets,” Lisa assured him. “Now suppose you help me with this crate.”

As they boarded the lead truck, Witwer drove up in a patrol car. He leaped out and hurried up to them, his face looking strangely haggard. “Before you take off,” he said to Anderton, “you’ll have to give me a breakdown on the situation with the precogs. I’m getting inquiries from the Senate. They want to find out if the middle report, the retraction, was an error — or what.” Confusedly, he finished: “I still can’t explain it. The minority report was wrong, wasn’t it?”

“Which minority report?” Anderton inquired, amused.

Witwer blinked. “Then that *is* it. I might have known.” Seated in the cabin of the truck, Anderton got out his pipe and shook tobacco into it. With Lisa’s lighter he ignited the tobacco and began operations. Lisa had gone back to the house, wanting to be sure nothing vital had been overlooked.

“There were three minority reports,” he told Witwer, enjoying the young man’s confusion. Someday, Witwer would learn not to wade into situations he didn’t fully understand. Satisfaction was Anderton’s final emotion. Old and worn-out as he was, he had been the only one to grasp the real nature of the problem.

“The three reports were consecutive,” he explained. “The first was ‘Donna.’ In that time-path, Kaplan told me of the plot, and I promptly murdered him. ‘Jerry,’ phased slightly ahead of ‘Donna,’ used her report as data. He factored in my knowledge of the report. In that, the second time-path, all I wanted to do was to keep my job. It wasn’t Kaplan I wanted to kill. It was my own position and life I was interested in.”

“And ‘Mike’ was the third report? That came *after* the minority report?” Witwer corrected himself. “I mean, it came last?”

” ‘Mike’ was the last of the three, yes. Faced with the knowledge of the first report, I had decided *not* to kill Kaplan. That produced report two. But faced with *that* report, I changed my mind back. Report two, situation two, was the situation Kaplan wanted to create. It was to the advantage of the police to recreate position one. And by that time I was thinking of the police. I had figured out what Kaplan was doing. The third report invalidated the second one in the same way the second one invalidated the first. That brought us back where we started from.”

Lisa came over, breathless and gasping. “Let’s go — we’re all finished here.” Lithe and agile, she ascended the metal rungs of the truck and squeezed in beside her husband and the driver. The latter obediently started up his truck and the others followed.

“Each report was different,” Anderton concluded. “Each was unique. But two of them agreed on one point. If left *free, I mould kill Kaplan.* That created the illusion of a majority report. Actually, that’s all it was — an illusion. ‘Donna’ and ‘Mike’ previewed the same event — but in two totally different time-paths, occurring under totally different situations. ‘Donna’ and ‘Jerry,’ the so-called minority report and half of the majority report, were incorrect. Of the three, ‘Mike’ was correct — since no report came after his, to invalidate him. That sums it up.”

Anxiously, Witwer trotted along beside the truck, his smooth, blond face creased with worry. “Will it happen again? Should we overhaul the set-up?”

“It can happen in only one circumstance,” Anderton said. “My case was unique, since I had access to the data. It *could* happen again — but only to the next Police Commissioner. So watch your step.” Briefly, he grinned, deriving no inconsiderable comfort from Witwer’s strained expression. Beside him, Lisa’s red lips twitched and her hand reached out and closed over his. “Better keep your eyes open,” he informed young Witwer. “It might happen to you at any time.”

Recall Mechanism

The analyst said : “I’m Humphrys, the man you came to see.” There were fear and hostility on the patient’s face, so Humphrys said: “I could tell a joke about analysts. Would that make you feel better? Or I could remind you that the National Health Trust is paying my fee; it’s not going to cost you a cent. Or I could cite the case of Psychoanalyst Y, who committed suicide last year because of overburdening anxiety resulting from a fraudulently filled out income tax.”

Grudgingly, the patient smiled. “I heard about that. So psychologists are fallible.” He got to his feet and held out his hand. “My name is Paul Sharp. My secretary made the arrangements with you. I have a little problem, nothing important, but I’d like to clear it up.”

The expression on his face showed that it was no small problem, and that, if he didn’t clear it up, it would probably destroy him.

“Come inside,” Humphrys said genially, opening the door to his office, “so we can both sit down.”

Sinking down in a soft easy chair, Sharp stretched his legs out in front of him. “No couch,” he observed.

“The couch vanished back around 1980,” Humphrys said. “Post-war analysts feel enough confidence to face their patients on an equal level.” He offered a pack of cigarettes to Sharp and then lit up himself. “Your secretary gave me no details; she just said you wanted a conference.”

Sharp said: “I can talk frankly?”

“I’m bonded,” Humphrys said, with pride. “If any of the material you tell me gets into the hands of security organizations, I forfeit approximately ten thousand dollars in Westbloc silver — hard cash, not paper stuff.”

“That’s good enough for me,” Sharp said, and began. “I’m an economist, working for the Department of Agriculture — the Division of War Destruction Salvage. I poke around H-bomb craters seeing what’s worth rebuilding.” He corrected himself. “Actually, I analyze reports on H-bomb craters and make recommendations. It was my recommendation to reclaim the farm lands around Sacramento and the industrial ring here at Los Angeles.”

In spite of himself, Humphrys was impressed. Here was a man in the policy-planning level of the Government. It gave him an odd feeling to realize that Sharp, like any other anxiety-ridden citizen, had come to the Psych Front for therapy.

“My sister-in-law got a nice advantage from the Sacramento reclamation,” Humphrys commented. “She had a small walnut orchard up there. The Government hauled off the ash, rebuilt the house and outbuildings, even staked her to a few dozen new trees. Except for her leg injury, she’s as well off as before the war.”

“We’re pleased with our Sacramento project,” Sharp said. He had begun to perspire; his smooth, pale forehead was streaked, and his hands, as he held his cigarette, shook. “Of course, I have a personal interest in Northern California. I was born there myself, up around Petaluma, where they used to turn out hens’ eggs by the million …” His voice trailed off huskily. “Humphrys,” he muttered, “what am I going to do?”

“First,” Humphrys said, “give me more information.”

“I —” Sharp grinned inanely. “I have some kind of hallucination. I’ve had it for years, but it’s getting worse. I’ve tried to shake it, but —” he gestured — “it comes back, stronger, bigger, more often.”

Beside Humphrys' desk the vid and aud recorders were scanning covertly. "Tell me what the hallucination is," he instructed. "Then maybe I can tell you why you have it."

He was tired. In the privacy of his living room, he sat dully examining a series of reports on carrot mutation. A variety, externally indistinguishable from the norm, was sending people in Oregon and Mississippi to the hospital with convulsions, fever and partial blindness. Why Oregon and Mississippi? Here with the report were photographs of the feral mutation; it *did* look like an ordinary carrot. And with the report came an exhaustive analysis of the toxic agent and recommendation for a neutralizing antidote.

Sharp wearily tossed the report aside and selected the next in order.

According to the second report, the notorious Detroit rat had shown up in St. Louis and Chicago, infesting the industrial and agricultural settlements replacing the destroyed cities. The Detroit rat — he had seen one once. That was three years ago; coming home one night, he had unlocked the door and seen, in the darkness, something scuttle away to safety. Arming himself with a hammer, he had pushed furniture around until he found it. The rat, huge and gray, had been in the process of building itself a wall-to-wall web. As it leaped up, he killed it with the hammer. A rat that spun webs …

He called an official exterminator and reported its presence.

A Special Talents Agency had been set up by the Government to utilize parabilities of wartime mutants evolved from the various radiation-saturated areas. But, he reflected, the Agency was equipped to handle only human mutants and their telepathic, precog, parakinetic and related abilities. There should have been a Special Talents Agency for vegetables and rodents, too.

From behind his chair came a stealthy sound. Turning quickly, Sharp found himself facing a tall, thin man wearing a drab raincoat and smoking a cigar.

“Did I scare you?” Giller asked, and snickered. “Take it easy, Paul. You look as if you’re going to pass out.”

“I was working,” Sharp said defensively, partially recovering his equilibrium.

“So I see,” said Giller.

“And thinking about rats.” Sharp pushed his work to one side. “How’d you get in?”

“Your door was unlocked.” Giller removed his raincoat and tossed it on the couch. “That’s right — you killed a Detroit. Right here in this room.” He gazed around the neat, unostentatious living room. “Are those things fatal?”

“Depends where they get you.” Going into the kitchen, Sharp found two beers in the refrigerator. As he poured, he said: “They shouldn’t waste grain making this stuff… but as long as they do, it’s a shame not to drink it.”

Giller accepted his beer greedily. “Must be nice to be a big wheel and have luxuries like this.” His small, dark eyes roved speculatively around the kitchen. “Your own stove, and your own refrigerator.” Smacking his lips, he added: “And beer. I haven’t had a beer since last August.”

“You’ll live,” Sharp said, without compassion. “Is this a business call? If so, get to the point; I’ve got plenty of work to do.”

Giller said: “I just wanted to say hello to a fellow Petaluman.”

Wincing, Sharp answered: “It sounds like some sort of synthetic fuel.”

Giller wasn’t amused. “Are you ashamed to have come from the very section that was once —”

“I know. The egg-laying capital of the universe. Sometimes I wonder — how many chicken feathers do you suppose were drifting around, the day the first H-bomb hit our town?”

“Billions,” Giller said morosely. “And some of them were mine. My chickens, I mean. Your family had a farm, didn’t they?”

“No,” Sharp said, refusing to be identified with Giller. “My family operated a drug store facing on Highway 101. A block from the park, near the sporting goods shop.” And, he added under his breath: You can go to hell. Because I’m not going to change my mind. You can camp on my doorstep the rest of your life and it still won’t do any good. Petaluma isn’t that important. And anyhow, the chickens are dead.

“How’s the Sac rebuild coming?” Giller inquired.

“Fine.”

“Plenty of those walnuts again?”

“Walnuts coming out of people’s ears.”

“Mice getting in the shell heaps?”

“Thousands of them,” Sharp sipped his beer; it was good quality, probably as good as pre-war. He wouldn’t know, because in 1961, the year the war broke out, he had been only six years old. But the beer tasted the way he remembered the old days: opulent and carefree and satisfying.

“We figure,” Giller said hoarsely, an avid gleam in his face, “that the Petaluma-Sonoma area can be built up again for about seven billion Westbloc. That’s nothing compared to what you’ve been doling out.”

“And the Petaluma-Sonoma area is nothing compared with the areas we’ve been rebuilding,” Sharp said. “You think we need eggs and wine? What we need is machinery. It’s Chicago and Pittsburgh and Los Angeles and St. Louis and —”

“You’ve forgotten,” Giller droned on, “that you’re a Petaluman. You’re turning your back on your origin — and on your duty.”

“Duty! You suppose the Government hired me to be a lobbyist for one trivial farm area?” Sharp flushed with outrage. “As far as I’m concerned —”

“We’re your people,” Giller said inflexibly. “And your people come first.”

When he had got rid of the man, Sharp stood for a time in the night darkness, gazing down the road after Giller’s receding car. Well, he said to himself, there goes the way of the world — me first and to hell with everybody else.

Sighing, he turned and made his way up the path toward the front porch of his house. Lights gleamed friendlily in the window. Shivering, he put his hand out and groped for the railing.

And then, as he clumsily mounted the stairs, the terrible thing happened.

With a rush, the lights of the window winked out. The porch railing dissolved under his fingers. In his ears a shrill screaming whine rose up and deafened him. He was falling. Struggling frantically, he tried to get hold of something, but there was only empty darkness around him, no substance, no reality, only the depth beneath him and the din of his own terrified shrieks.

“Help!” he shouted, and the sound beat futilely back at him. “I’m falling!”

And then, gasping, he was outstretched on the damp lawn, clutching handfuls of grass and dirt. Two feet from the porch — he had missed the first step in the darkness and had slipped and fallen. An ordinary event: the window lights had been blocked by the concrete railing. The whole thing had happened in a split second and he had fallen only the length of his own body. There was blood on his forehead; he had cut himself as he struck.

Silly. A childish, infuriating event.

Shakily, he climbed to his feet and mounted the steps. Inside the house, he stood leaning against the wall, shuddering and panting. Gradually the fear faded out and rationality returned.

Why was he so afraid of falling?

Something had to be done. This was worse than ever before, even worse than the time he had stumbled coming out of the elevator at the office — and had instantly been reduced to screaming terror in front of a lobbyful of people.

What would happen to him if he *really* fell? If, for example, he were to step off one of the overhead ramps connecting the major Los Angeles office buildings? The fall would be stopped by safety screens; no physical harm was ever done, though people fell all the time. But for him — the psychological shock might be fatal. *Would* be fatal; to his mind, at least.

He made a mental note: no more going out on the ramps. Under no circumstances. He had been avoiding them for years, but from now on, ramps were in the same class as air travel. Since 1982 he hadn’t left the surface of the planet. And, in the last few years, he seldom visited offices more than ten flights up.

But if he stopped using the ramps, how was he going to get into his own research files? The file room was accessibly only by ramp: the narrow metallic path leading up from the office area.

Perspiring, terrified, he sank down on the couch and sat huddled over, wondering how he was going to keep his job, do his work.

And how he was going to stay alive.

Humphrys waited, but his patient seemed to have finished.

“Does it make you feel any better,” Humphrys asked, “to know that fear of falling is a common phobia?”

“No,” Sharp answered.

“I guess there’s no reason why it should. You say it’s shown up before? When was the first time?”

“When I was eight. The war had been going on two years. I was on the surface, examining my vegetable garden.” Sharp smiled weakly. “Even when I was a kid, I grew things. The San Francisco network picked up exhaust trails of a Soviet missile and all the warning towers went off like Roman candles. I was almost on top of the shelter. I raced to it, lifted the lid and started down the stairs. At the bottom were my mother and father. They yelled for me to hurry. I started to run down the stairs.”

“And fell?” Humphrys asked expectantly.

“I didn’t fall; I suddenly got afraid. I couldn’t go any farther; I just stood there. And they were yelling up at me. They wanted to get the bottom plate screwed in place. And they couldn’t until I was down.”

With a touch of aversion, Humphrys acknowledged: “I remember those old two-stage shelters. I wonder how many people got shut between the lid and the bottom plate.” He eyed his patient. “As a child, had you heard of that happening? People being trapped on the stairs, not able to get back up, not able to get down …”

“I wasn’t scared of being trapped! I was scared of falling — afraid I’d pitch head-forward off the steps.” Sharp licked his dry lips. “Well, so I turned around —” His body shuddered. “I went back up and outside.”

“During the attack?”

“They shot down the missile. But I spent the alert tending my vegetables. Afterward, my family beat me nearly unconscious.”

Humphrys’ mind formed the words: origin of guilt.

“The next time,” Sharp continued, “was when I was fourteen. The war had been over a few months. We started back to see what was left of our town. Nothing was left, only a crater of radioactive slag several hundred feet deep. Work teams were creeping down into the crater. I stood on the edge watching them. The fear came.” He put out his cigarette and sat waiting until the analyst found him another. “I left the area after that. Every night I dreamed about that crater, that big dead mouth. I hitched a ride on a military truck and rode to San Francisco.”

“When was the next time?” asked Humphrys.

Irritably, Sharp said: “Then it happened all the time, every time I was up high, every time I had to walk up or down a flight of steps — any situation where I was high and might fall. But to be afraid to walk up the steps of my own house —” He broke off temporarily. “I can’t walk up three steps,” he said wretchedly. “Three concrete steps.”

“Any particular bad episodes, outside of those you’ve mentioned?”

“I was in love with a pretty brown-haired girl who lived on the top floor of the Atcheson Apartments. Probably she still lives there; I wouldn’t know. I got five or six floors up and then — I told her good night and came back down.” Ironically, he said: “She must have thought I was crazy.”

“Others?” Humphrys asked, mentally noting the appearance of the sexual element.

“One time I couldn’t accept a job because it involved travel by air. It had to do with inspecting agricultural projects.”

Humphrys said: “In the old days, analysts looked for the origin of a phobia. Now we ask: *what does it do?* Usually it gets the individual out of situations he unconsciously dislikes.”

A slow, disgusted flush appeared on Sharp’s face. “Can’t you do better than that?”

Disconcerted, Humphrys murmured: “I don’t say I agree with the theory or that it’s necessarily true in your case. I’ll say this much though: it’s not falling you’re afraid of. It’s something that falling reminds you of. With luck we ought to be able to dig up the prototype experience — what they used to call the original traumatic incident.” Getting to his feet, he began to drag over a stemmed tower of electronic mirrors. “My lamp,” he explained. “It’ll melt the barriers.”

Sharp regarded the lamp with apprehension. “Look,” he muttered nervously, “I don’t want my mind reconstructed. I may be a neurotic, but I take pride in my personality.”

“This won’t affect your personality.” Bending down, Humphrys plugged in the lamp. “It will bring up material not accessible to your rational center. I’m going to trace your life — track back to the incident at which you were done great harm — and find out what you’re *really* afraid of.”

Black shapes drifted around him. Sharp screamed and struggled wildly, trying to pry loose the fingers closing over his arms and legs. Something smashed against his face. Coughing, he slumped forward, dribbling blood

and saliva and bits of broken teeth. For an instant, blinding light flashed; he was being scrutinized.

“Is he dead?” a voice demanded.

“Not yet.” A foot poked experimentally into Sharp’s side. Dimly, in his half-consciousness, he could hear ribs cracking. “Almost, though.”

“Can you hear me, Sharp?” a voice rasped, close to his ear.

He didn’t respond. He lay trying not to die, trying not to associate himself with the cracked and broken thing that had been his body.

“You probably imagine,” the voice said, familiar, intimate, “that I’m going to say you’ve got one last chance. But you don’t, Sharp. Your chance is gone. I’m telling you what we’re going to do with you.”

Gasping, he tried not to hear. And, futilely, he tried not to feel what they were systematically doing to him.

“All right,” the familiar voice said finally, when it had been done. “Now throw him out.”

What remained of Paul Sharp was lugged to a circular hatch. The nebulous outline of darkness rose up around him and then — hideously — he was pitched into it. Down he fell, but this time he didn’t scream.

No physical apparatus remained with which to scream.

Snapping the lamp off, Humphrys bent over and methodically roused the slumped figure.

“Sharp!” he ordered loudly. “Wake up! Come out of it!”

The man groaned, blinked his eyes, stirred. Over his face settled a glaze of pure, unmitigated torment.

“God,” he whispered, eyes blank, body limp with suffering. “They —”

“You’re back here,” Humphrys said, shaken by what had been dredged up. “There’s nothing to worry about; you’re absolutely safe. It’s over with — happened years ago.”

“Over,” Sharp murmured pathetically.

“You’re back in the present. Understand?”

“Yes,” Sharp muttered. “But — what was it? They pushed me out — through and into something. And I went on down.” He trembled violently. “I fell.”

“You fell through a hatch,” Humphrys told him calmly. “You were beaten up and badly injured — fatally, they assumed. But you *did* survive. You are alive. You got out of it.”

“Why did they do it?” Sharp asked brokenly. His face, sagging and gray, twitched with despair. “Help me, Humphrys …”

“Consciously, you don’t remember when it happened?”

“No.”

“Do you remember where?”

“No.” Sharp’s face jerked spasmodically. “They tried to kill me — they *did* kill me!” Struggling upright, he protested: “Nothing like that happened to me. I’d remember if it had. It’s a false memory — my mind’s been tampered with!”

“It’s been repressed,” Humphrys said firmly, “deeply buried because of the pain and shock. A form of amnesia — it’s been filtering indirectly up in the form of your phobia. But now that you recall it consciously —”

“Do I have to go back?” Sharp’s voice rose hysterically. “Do I have to get under that damn lamp again?”

“It’s got to come out on a conscious level,” Humphrys told him, “but not all at once. You’ve had your limit for today.”

Sagging with relief, Sharp settled back in the chair. “Thanks,” he said weakly. Touching his face, his body, he whispered: “I’ve been carrying that in my mind all these years. Corroding, eating away —”

“There should be some diminution of the phobia,” the analyst told him, “as you grapple with the incident itself. We’ve made progress; we now have some idea of the real fear. It involves bodily injury at the hands of professional criminals. Ex-soldiers in the early post-war years… gangs of bandits, I remember.”

A measure of confidence returned to Sharp. “It isn’t hard to understand a falling fear, under the circumstances. Considering what happened to me … Shakily, he started to his feet. And screamed shrilly.

“What is it?” Humphrys demanded, hastily coming over and grabbing hold of his arm. Sharp leaped violently away, staggered, and collapsed inertly in the chair. “What happened?”

Face working, Sharp managed: “I can’t get up.”

“What?”

“I can’t stand up.” Imploringly, he gazed up at the analyst, stricken and terrified. “I’m — afraid I’ll fall. Doctor, now I can’t even get to my feet.”

For an interval neither man spoke. Finally, his eyes on the floor, Sharp whispered: “The reason I came to you, Humphrys, is because your office is on the ground floor. That’s a laugh, isn’t it? I couldn’t go any higher.”

“We’re going to have to turn the lamp back on you,” Humphrys said.

“I realize it. I’m scared.” Gripping the arms of the chair, he continued: “Go ahead. What else can we do? I can’t leave here. Humphrys, this thing is going to kill me.”

“No, it isn’t.” Humphrys got the lamp into position. “We’ll get you out of this. Try to relax; try to think of nothing in particular.” Clicking the mechanism on, he said softly: “This time I don’t want the traumatic incident itself. I want the envelope of experience that surrounds it. I want the broader segment of which it’s a part.”

Paul Sharp walked quietly through the snow. His breath, in front of him, billowed outward and formed a sparkling cloud of white. To his left lay the jagged ruins of what had been buildings. The ruins, covered with snow, seemed almost lovely. For a moment he paused, entranced.

“Interesting,” a member of his research team observed, coming up. “Could be anything — absolutely anything — under there.”

“It’s beautiful, in a way,” Sharp commented.

“See that spire?” The young man pointed with one heavily gloved finger; he still wore his lead-shielded suit. He and his group had been poking around the still-contaminated crater. Their boring bars were lined up in an orderly row. “That was a church,” he informed Sharp. “A nice one, by the looks of it. And over there —” he indicated an indiscriminate jumble of ruin — “that was the main civic center.”

“The city wasn’t directly hit, was it?” Sharp asked.

“It was bracketed. Come on down and see what we’ve run into. The crater to our right — “

“No, thanks,” Sharp said, pulling back with intense aversion. “I’ll let you do the crawling around.”

The youthful expert glanced curiously at Sharp, then forgot the matter. “Unless we run into something unexpected, we should be able to start reclamation within a week. The first step, of course, is to clear off the slag-layer. It’s fairly well cracked — a lot of plant growth has perforated it, and natural decay has reduced a great deal of it to semi-organic ash.”

“Fine,” Sharp said, with satisfaction. “I’ll be glad to see something here again, after all these years.”

The expert asked: “What was it like before the war? I never saw that; I was born after the destruction began.”

“Well,” Sharp said, surveying the fields of snow, “this was a thriving agricultural center. They grew grapefruit here. Arizona grapefruit. The Roosevelt Dam was along this way.”

“Yes,” the expert said, nodding. “We located the remnants of it.”

“Cotton was grown here. So was lettuce, alfalfa, grapes, olives, apricots — the thing I remember most, the time I came through Phoenix with my family, was the eucalyptus trees.”

“We won’t have all that back,” the expert said regretfully. “What the heck — eucalyptus? I never heard of that.”

“There aren’t any left in the United States,” Sharp said. “You’d have to go to Australia.”

Listening, Humphrys jotted down a notation. “Okay,” he said aloud, switching off the lamp. “Come back, Sharp.”

With a grunt, Paul Sharp blinked and opened his eyes. “What —” Struggling up, he yawned, stretched, peered blankly around the office. “Something about reclamation. I was supervising a team of recon men. A young kid.”

“When did you reclaim Phoenix?” Humphrys asked. “That seems to be included in the vital time-space segment.”

Sharp frowned. “We never reclaimed Phoenix. That’s still projected. We hope to get at it sometime in the next year.”

“Are you positive?”

“Naturally. That’s my job.”

“I’m going to have to send you back,” Humphrys said, already reaching for the lamp.

“What happened?”

The lamp came on. “Relax,” Humphrys instructed briskly, a trifle too briskly for a man supposed to know exactly what he was doing. Forcing himself to slow down, he said carefully: “I want your perspective to broaden. Take in an earlier incident, one preceding the Phoenix reclamation.”

In an inexpensive cafeteria in the business district, two men sat facing each other across a table.

“I’m sorry,” Paul Sharp said, with impatience. “I’ve got to get back to my work.” Picking up his cup of ersatz coffee, he gulped the contents down.

The tall, thin man carefully pushed away his empty dishes and, leaning back, lit a cigar.

“For two years,” Giller said bluntly, “you’ve been giving us the runaround. Frankly, I’m a little tired of it.”

“Runaround?” Sharp had started to rise. “I don’t get your drift.”

“You’re going to reclaim an agricultural area — you’re going to tackle Phoenix. So don’t tell me you’re sticking to industrial. How long do you imagine those people are going to keep on living? Unless you reclaim their farms and lands —”

“What people?”

Harshly, Giller said: “The people living at Petaluma. Camped around the craters.”

With vague dismay, Sharp murmured: “I didn’t realize there was anybody living there. I thought you all headed for the nearest reclaimed regions, San Francisco and Sacramento.”

“You never read the petitions we presented,” Giller said softly.

Sharp colored. “No, as a matter of fact. Why should I? If there’re people camping in the slag, it doesn’t alter the basic situation; you should leave, get out of there. That area is through.” He added: “I got out.”

Very quietly, Giller said: “You would have stuck around if you’d farmed there. If your family had farmed there for over a century. It’s different from running a drug store. Drug stores are the same everywhere in the world.”

“So are farms.”

“No,” Giller said dispassionately. “Your land, your family’s land, has a unique feeling. We’ll keep on camping there until we’re dead or until you decide to reclaim.” Mechanically collecting the checks, he finished: “I’m sorry for you, Paul. You never had roots like we have. And I’m sorry you can’t be made to understand.” As he reached into his coat for his wallet, he asked: “When can you fly out there?”

“Fly!” Sharp echoed, shuddering. “I’m not flying anywhere.”

“You’ve got to see the town again. You can’t decide without having seen those people, seen how they’re living.”

“No,” Sharp said emphatically. “I’m not flying out there. I can decide on the basis of reports.”

Giller considered. “You’ll come,” he declared.

“Over my dead body!”

Giller nodded. “Maybe so. But you’re going to come. You can’t let us die without looking at us. You’ve got to have the courage to see what it is you’re doing.” He got out a pocket calendar and scratched a mark by one of the dates. Tossing it across the table to Sharp, he informed him: “We’ll come by your office and pick you up. We have the plane we flew down here. It’s mine. It’s a sweet ship.”

Trembling, Sharp examined the calendar. And, standing over his mumbling, supine patient, so did Humphrys.

He had been right. Sharp’s traumatic incident, the repressed material, didn’t lie in the past.

Sharp was suffering from a phobia based on an event six months in the future.

“Can you get up?” Humphrys inquired.

In the chair, Paul Sharp stirred feebly. “I —” he began, and then sank into silence.

“No more for a while,” Humphrys told him reassuringly. “You’ve had enough. But I wanted to get you away from the trauma itself.”

“I feel better now.”

“Try to stand.” Humphrys approached and stood waiting, as the man crept unsteadily to his feet.

“Yes,” Sharp breathed. “It has receded. What was that last? I was in a cafe or something. With Giller.”

From his desk Humphrys got a prescription pad. “I’m going to write you out a little comfort. Some round white pills to take every four hours.” He scribbled and then handed the slip to his patient. “So you will relax. It’ll take away some of the tension.”

“Thanks,” Sharp said, in a weak, almost inaudible voice. Presently, he asked: “A lot of material came up, didn’t it?”

“It certainly did,” Humphrys admitted tightly.

There was nothing he could do for Paul Sharp. The man was very close to death now — in six short months, Giller would go to work on him. And it was too bad, because Sharp was a nice guy, a nice, conscientious, hardworking bureaucrat who was only trying to do his job as he saw it.

“What do you think?” Sharp asked pathetically. “Can you help me?”

“I’ll try,” Humphrys answered, not able to look directly at him. “But it goes very deep.”

“It’s been a long time growing,” Sharp admitted humbly. Standing by the chair, he seemed small and forlorn; not an important official but only one isolated, unprotected individual. “I’d sure appreciate your help. If this phobia keeps up, no telling where it’ll end.”

Humphrys asked suddenly, “Would you consider changing your mind and granting Giller’s demands?”

“I can’t,” Sharp said. “It’s bad policy. I’m opposed to special pleading, and that’s what it is.”

“Even if you come from the area? Even if the people are friends and former neighbors of yours?”

“It’s my job,” Sharp said. “I have to do it without regard for my feelings or anybody else’s.”

“You’re not a bad fellow,” Humphrys said involuntarily. “I’m sorry —” He broke off.

“Sorry what?” Sharp moved mechanically toward the exit door. “I’ve taken enough of your time. I realize how busy you analysts are. When shall I come back. *Can* I come back?”

“Tomorrow.” Humphrys guided him outside and into the corridor. “About this same time, if it’s convenient.”

“Thanks a lot,” Sharp said, with relief. “I really appreciate it.”

As soon as he was alone in his office, Humphrys closed the door and strode back to his desk. Reaching down, he grabbed the telephone and unsteadily dialed.

“Give me somebody on your medical staff,” he ordered curtly when he had been connected with the Special Talents Agency.

“This is Kirby,” a professional-sounding voice came presently. “Medical research.”

Humphrys briefly identified himself. “I have a patient here,” he said, “who seems to be a latent precog.”

Kirby was interested. “What area does he come from?”

“Petaluma. Sonoma County, north of San Francisco Bay. It’s east of —”

“We’re familiar with the area. A number of precogs have showed up there. That’s been a gold mine for us.”

“Then I was right,” Humphrys said.

“What’s the date of the patient’s birth?”

“He was six years old when the war began.”

“Well,” Kirby said, disappointed, “then he didn’t really get enough of a dose. He’ll never develop a full precog talent, such as we work with here.”

“In other words, you won’t help?”

“Latents — people with a touch of it — outnumber the real carriers. We don’t have time to fool with them. You’ll probably run into dozens like your patient, if you stir around. When it’s imperfect, the talent isn’t valuable; it’s going to be a nuisance for the man, probably nothing else.”

“Yes, it’s a nuisance,” Humphrys agreed caustically. “The man is only months away from a violent death. Since he was a child, he’s been getting

advanced phobic warnings. As the event gets closer, the reactions intensify."

"He's not conscious of the future material?"

"It operates strictly on a subrational level."

"Under the circumstances," Kirby said thoughtfully, "maybe it's just as well. These things appear to be fixed. If he knew about it, he still couldn't change it."

Dr. Charles Bamberg, consulting psychiatrist, was just leaving his office when he noticed a man sitting in the waiting room.

Odd, Bamberg thought. I have no patients left for today.

Opening the door, he stepped into the waiting room. "Did you wish to see me?"

The man sitting on the chair was tall and thin. He wore a wrinkled tan raincoat, and, as Bamberg appeared, he began tensely stubbing out a cigar.

"Yes," he said, getting clumsily to his feet.

"Do you have an appointment?"

"No appointment." The man gazed at him in appeal. "I picked you —" He laughed with confusion. "Well, you're on the top floor."

"The top floor?" Bamberg was intrigued. "What's that got to do with it?"

"I — well, Doc, I feel much more comfortable when I'm up high."

“I see,” Bamberg said. A compulsion, he thought to himself. Fascinating. “And,” he said aloud, “when you’re up high, how do you feel? Better?”

“Not better,” the man answered. “Can I come in? Do you have a second to spare me?”

Bamberg looked at his watch. “All right,” he agreed, admitting the man. “Sit down and tell me about it.”

Gratefully, Giller seated himself. “It interferes with my life,” he said rapidly, jerkily. “Every time I see a flight of stairs, I have an irresistible compulsion to go up it. And plane flight — I’m always flying around. I have my own ship; I can’t afford it, but I’ve got to have it.”

“I see,” Bamberg said. “Well,” he continued genially, “that’s not really so bad. After all, it isn’t exactly a fatal compulsion.”

Helplessly, Giller replied: “When I’m up there —” He swallowed wretchedly, his dark eyes gleaming. “Doctor, when I’m up high, in an office building, or in my plane — I feel another compulsion.”

“What is it?”

“I —” Giller shuddered. “I have an irresistible urge to push people.”

“To push people?”

“Toward windows. Out.” Giller made a gesture. “What am I going to do, Doc? I’m afraid I’ll kill somebody. There was a little shrimp of a guy I pushed once — and one day a girl was standing ahead of me on an escalator — I shoved her. She was injured.”

“I see,” Bamberg said, nodding. Repressed hostility, he thought to himself. Interwoven with sex. Not unusual.

He reached for his lamp.

The Unreconstructed M

I

The machine was a foot wide and two feet long; it looked like an oversized box of crackers. Silently, with great caution, it climbed the side of a concrete building; it had lowered two rubberized rollers and was now beginning the first phase of its job.

From its rear, a flake of blue enamel was exuded. The machine pressed the flake firmly against the rough concrete and then continued on. Its upward path carried it from vertical concrete to vertical steel: it had reached a window. The machine paused and produced a microscopic fragment of cloth fabric. The cloth, with great care, was embedded in the fitting of the steel window frame.

In the chill darkness, the machine was virtually invisible. The glow of a distant tangle of traffic briefly touched it, illuminated its polished hull, and departed. The machine resumed its work.

It projected a plastic pseudopodium and incinerated the pane of window glass. There was no response from within the gloomy apartment: nobody was home. The machine, now dulled with particles of glass-dust, crept over the steel frame and raised an inquisitive receptor.

While it received, it exerted precisely two hundred pounds pressure on the steel window frame; the frame obediently bent. Satisfied, the machine descended the inside of the wall to the moderately thick carpet. There it began the second phase of its job.

One single human hair — follicle and speck of scalp included — was deposited on the hardwood floor by the lamp. Not far from the piano, two

dried grains of tobacco were ceremoniously laid out. The machine waited an interval of ten seconds and then, as an internal section of magnetic tape clicked into place, it suddenly said, “Ugh! Damn it…”

Curiously, its voice was husky and masculine.

The machine made its way to the closet door, which was locked. Climbing the wood surface, the machine reached the lock mechanism, and, inserting a thin section of itself, caressed the tumblers back. Behind the row of coats was a small mound of batteries and wires: a self-powered video recorder. The machine destroyed the reservoir of film — which was vital — and then, as it left the closet, expelled a drop of blood on the jagged tangle that had been the lens-scanner. The drop of blood was even more vital.

While the machine was pressing the artificial outline of a heel mark into the greasy film that covered the flooring of the closet, a sharp sound came from the hallway. The machine ceased its work and became rigid. A moment later a small, middle-aged man entered the apartment, coat over one arm, briefcase in the other.

“Good God,” he said, stopping instantly as he saw the machine. “What are you?”

The machine lifted the nozzle of its front section and shot an explosive pellet at the man’s half-bald head. The pellet traveled into the skull and detonated. Still clutching his coat and briefcase, bewildered expression on his face, the man collapsed to the rug. His glasses, broken, lay twisted beside his ear. His body stirred a little, twitched, and then was satisfactorily quiet.

Only two steps remained to the job, now that the main part was done. The machine deposited a bit of burnt match in one of the spotless ashtrays resting on the mantel, and entered the kitchen to search for a water glass. It was starting up the side of the sink when the noise of human voices startled it.

“This is the apartment,” a voice said, clear and close.

“Get ready — he ought to still be here.” Another voice, a man’s voice, like the first. The hall door was pushed open and two individuals in heavy overcoats sprinted purposefully into the apartment. At their approach, the machine dropped to the kitchen floor, the water glass forgotten. Something had gone wrong. Its rectangular outline flowed and wavered; pulling itself into an upright package it fused its shape into that of a conventional TV unit.

It was holding that emergency form when one of the men — tall, red-haired — peered briefly into the kitchen.

“Nobody in here,” the man declared, and hurried on.

“The window,” his companion said, panting. Two more figures entered the apartment, an entire crew. “The glass is gone — missing. He got in that way.”

“But he’s gone.” The red-haired man reappeared at the kitchen door; he snapped on the light and entered, a gun visible in his hand. “Strange … we got here right away, as soon as we picked up the rattle.” Suspiciously, he examined his wristwatch. “Rosenburg’s been dead only a few seconds … how could he have got out again so fast?”

Standing in the street entrance, Edward Ackers listened to the voice. During the last half hour the voice had taken on a carping, nagging whine; sinking almost to inaudibility, it plodded along, mechanically turning out its message of complaint.

“You’re tired,” Ackers said. “Go home. Take a hot bath.”

“No,” the voice said, interrupting its tirade. The locus of the voice was a large illuminated blob on the dark sidewalk, a few yards to Acker’s right. The revolving neon sign read:

BANISH IT!

Thirty times — he had counted — within the last few minutes the sign had captured a passerby and the man in the booth had begun his harangue. Beyond the booth were several theaters and restaurants: the booth was well-situated.

But it wasn't for the crowd that the booth had been erected. It was for Ackers and the offices behind him; the tirade was aimed directly at the Interior Department. The nagging racket had gone on so many months that Ackers was scarcely aware of it. Rain on the roof. Traffic noises. He yawned, folded his arms, and waited.

"Banish it," the voice complained peevishly. "Come on, Ackers. Say something; do something."

"I'm waiting," Ackers said complacently.

A group of middle-class citizens passed the booth and were handed leaflets. The citizens scattered the leaflets after them, and Ackers laughed.

"Don't laugh," the voice muttered. "It's not funny; it costs us money to print those."

"Your personal money?" Ackers inquired.

"Partly." Garth was lonely, tonight. "What are you waiting for? What's happened? I saw a police team leave your roof a few minutes ago … ?

"We may take in somebody," Ackers said, "there's been a killing."

Down the dark sidewalk the man stirred in his dreary propaganda booth. "Oh?" Harvey Garth's voice came. He leaned forward and the two looked

directly at each other: Ackers, carefully-groomed, well-fed, wearing a respectable overcoat… Garth, a thin man, much younger, with a lean, hungry face composed mostly of nose and forehead.

“So you see,” Ackers told him, “we do need the system. Don’t be Utopian.”

“A man is murdered; and you rectify the moral imbalance by killing the killer.” Garth’s protesting voice rose in a bleak spasm. “Banish it! Banish the system that condemns men to certain extinction!”

“Get your leaflets here,” Ackers parodied dryly. “And your slogans. Either or both. What would you suggest in place of the system?”

Garth’s voice was proud with conviction. “Education.”

Amused, Ackers asked: “Is that all? You think that would stop anti-social activity? Criminals just don’t — *know* better?”

“And psychotherapy, of course.” His projected face bony and intense, Garth peered out of his booth like an aroused turtle. “They’re sick … that’s why they commit crimes, healthy men don’t commit crimes. And you compound it; you create a sick society of punitive cruelty.” He waggled an accusing finger. “You’re the real culprit, you and the whole Interior Department. You and the whole Banishment System.”

Again and again the neon sign blinked BANISH it! Meaning, of course, the system of compulsory ostracism for felons, the machinery that projected a condemned human being into some random backwater region of the sidereal universe, into some remote and out-of-the-way corner where he would be of no harm.

“No harm to us, anyhow,” Ackers mused aloud.

Garth spoke the familiar argument. “Yes, but what about the local inhabitants?”

Too bad about the local inhabitants. Anyhow, the banished victim spent his energy and time trying to find a way back to the Sol System. If he got back before old age caught up with him he was readmitted by society. Quite a challenge … especially to some cosmopolite who had never set foot outside Greater New York. There were — probably — many involuntary expatriates cutting grain in odd fields with primitive sickles. The remote sections of the universe seemed composed mostly of dank rural cultures, isolated agrarian enclaves typified by small-time bartering of fruit and vegetables and handmade artifacts.

“Did you know,” Ackers said, “that in the Age of Monarchs, a pickpocket was usually hanged?”

“Banish it,” Garth continued monotonously, sinking back into his booth. The sign revolved; leaflets were passed out. And Ackers impatiently watched the late-evening street for sign of the hospital truck.

He knew Heimie Rosenburg. A sweeter little guy there never was… although Heimie had been mixed up in one of the sprawling slave combines that illegally transported settlers to outsystem fertile planets. Between them, the two largest slavers had settled virtually the entire Sirius System. Four out of six emigrants were hustled out in carriers registered as “freighters.” It was hard to picture gentle little Heimie Rosenburg as a business agent for Tirol Enterprises, but there it was.

As he waited, Ackers conjectured on Heimie’s murder. Probably one element of the incessant subterranean war going on between Paul Tirol and his major rival, David Lantano, was a brilliant and energetic newcomer … but murder was anybody’s game. It all depended on how it was done; it could be commercial hack or the purest art.

“Here comes something,” Garth’s voice sounded, carried to his inner ear by the delicate output transformers of the booth’s equipment. “Looks like a

freezer.”

It was; the hospital truck had arrived. Ackers stepped forward as the truck halted and the back was let down.

“How soon did you get there?” he asked the cop who jumped heavily to the pavement.

“Right away,” the cop answered, “but no sign of the killer. I don’t think we’re going to get Heimie back … they got him dead-center, right in the cerebellum. Expert work, no amateur stuff.”

Disappointed, Ackers clambered into the hospital truck to inspect for himself.

Very tiny and still, Heimie Rosenburg lay on his back, arms at his sides, gazing sightlessly up at the roof of the truck. On his face remained the expression of bewildered wonder. Somebody — one of the cops — had placed his bent glasses in his clenched hand. In falling he had cut his cheek. The destroyed portion of his skull was covered by a moist plastic web.

“Who’s back at the apartment?” Ackers asked presently.

“The rest of my crew,” the cop answered. “And an independent researcher. Leroy Beam.”

“Him,” Ackers said, with aversion. “How is it he showed up?”

“Caught the rattle, too, happened to be passing with his rig. Poor Heimie had an awful big booster on that rattle … I’m surprised it wasn’t picked up here at the main offices.”

“They say Heimie had a high anxiety level,” Ackers said. “Bugs all over his apartment. You’re starting to collect evidence?”

“The teams are moving in,” the cop said. “We should begin getting specifications in half an hour. The killer knocked out the vid bug set up in the closet. But —” He grinned. “He cut himself breaking the circuit. A drop of blood, right on the wiring; it looks promising.”

At the apartment, Leroy Beam watched the Interior police begin their analysis. They worked smoothly and thoroughly, but Beam was dissatisfied.

His original impression remained: he was suspicious. Nobody could have gotten away so quickly. Heimie had died, and his death — the cessation of his neural pattern — had triggered off an automatic squawk. A rattle didn’t particularly protect its owner, but its existence ensured (or usually ensured) detection of the murderer. Why had it failed Heimie?

Prowling moodily, Leroy Beam entered the kitchen for the second time. There, on the floor by the sink, was a small portable TV unit, the kind popular with the sporting set: a gaudy little packet of plastic and knobs and multi-tinted lenses.

“Why this?” Beam asked, as one of the cops plodded past him. “This TV unit sitting here on the kitchen floor. It’s out of place.”

The cop ignored him. In the living room, elaborate police detection equipment was scraping the various surfaces inch by inch. In the half hour since Heimie’s death, a number of specifications had been logged. First, the drop of blood on the damaged vid wiring. Second, a hazy heel mark where the murderer had stepped. Third, a bit of burnt match in the ashtray. More were expected; the analysis had only begun.

It usually took nine specifications to delineate the single individual. Leroy Beam glanced cautiously around him. None of the cops was watching, so he bent down and picked up the TV unit; it felt ordinary. He clicked the *on* switch and waited. Nothing happened; no image formed. Strange.

He was holding it upside down, trying to see the inner chassis, when Edward Ackers from Interior entered the apartment. Quickly, Beam stuffed the TV unit into the pocket of his heavy overcoat.

"What are you doing here?" Ackers said.

"Seeking," Beam answered, wondering if Ackers noticed his tubby bulge. "I'm in business, too."

"Did you know Heimie?"

"By reputation," Beam answered vaguely. "Tied in with Tirol's combine, I hear; some sort of front man. Had an office on Fifth Avenue."

"Swank place, like the rest of those Fifth Avenue feather merchants." Ackers went on into the living room to watch detectors gather up evidence.

There was a vast nearsightedness to the wedge grinding ponderously across the carpet. It was scrutinizing at a microscopic level, and its field was sharply curtailed. As fast as material was obtained, it was relayed to the Interior offices, to the aggregate file banks where the civil population was represented by a series of punch cards, cross-indexed infinitely.

Lifting the telephone, Ackers called his wife. "I won't be home," he told her. "Business."

A lag and then Ellen responded. "Oh?" she said distantly. "Well, thanks for letting me know."

Over in the corner, two members of the police crew were delightedly examining a new discovery, valid enough to be a specification. "I'll call you again," he said hurriedly to Ellen, "before I leave. Goodbye."

"Goodbye," Ellen said curtly, and managed to hang up before he did. The new discovery was the undamaged aud bug, which was mounted under

the floor lamp. A continuous magnetic tape — still in motion — gleamed amiably; the murder episode had been recorded sound-wise in its entirety.

"Everything," a cop said gleefully to Ackers. "It was going before Heimie got home."

"You played it back?"

"A portion. There's a couple words spoken by the murderer, should be enough."

Ackers got in touch with Interior. "Have the specifications on the Rosenburg case been fed, yet?"

"Just the first," the attendant answered. "The file discriminates the usual massive category — about six billion names."

Ten minutes later the second specification was fed to the files. Persons with type O blood, with size 11 1/2 shoes, numbered slightly over a billion. The third specification brought in the element of smoker-nonsmoker. That dropped the number to less than a billion, but not much less. Most adults smoked.

"The aud tape will drop it fast," Leroy Beam commented, standing beside Ackers, his arms folded to conceal his bulging coat. "Ought to be able to get age, at least."

The aud tape, analyzed, gave thirty to forty years as the conjectured age. And — timbre analysis — a man of perhaps two hundred pounds. A little later the bent steel window frame was examined, and the warp noted. It jibed with the specification of the aud tape. There were now six specifications, including that of sex (male). The number of persons in the in-group was falling rapidly.

“It won’t be long,” Ackers said genially. “And if he tacked one of those little buckets to the building side, we’ll have a paint scrape.”

Beam said: “I’m leaving. Good luck.”

“Stick around.”

“Sorry.” Beam moved toward the hall door. “This is yours, not mine. I’ve got my own business to attend to… I’m doing research for a hot-shot nonferrous mining concern.”

Ackers eyed his coat. “Are you pregnant?”

“Not that I know of,” Beam said, coloring. “I’ve led a good clean life.” Awkwardly, he patted his coat. “You mean this?”

By the window, one of the police gave a triumphant yap. The two bits of pipe tobacco had been discovered: a refinement for the third specification. “Excellent,” Ackers said, turning away from Beam and momentarily forgetting him.

Beam left.

Very shortly he was driving across town toward his own labs, the small and independent research outfit that he headed, unsupported by a government grant. Resting on the seat beside him was the portable TV unit; it was still silent.

“First of all,” Beam’s gowned technician declared, “it has a power supply approximately seventy times that of a portable TV pack. We picked up the Gamma radiation.” He displayed the usual detector. “So you’re right, it’s not a TV set”

Gingerly, Beam lifted the small unit from the lab bench. Five hours had passed, and still he knew nothing about it. Taking firm hold of the back he

pulled with all his strength. The back refused to come off. It wasn't stuck: there were no seams. The back was not a back; it only looked like a back.

"Then what is it?" he asked.

"Could be lots of things," the technician said noncommittally; he had been roused from the privacy of his home, and it was now two-thirty in the morning. "Could be some sort of scanning equipment. A bomb. A weapon. Any kind of gadget." Laboriously, Beam felt the unit all over, searching for a flaw in the surface. "It's uniform," he murmured. "A single surface."

"You bet. The breaks are false — it's a poured substance. And," the technician added, "it's hard. I tried to chip off a representative sample but —" He gestured. "No results."

"Guaranteed not to shatter when dropped," Beam said absently. "New extra-tough plastic." He shook the unit energetically; the muted noise of metal parts in motion reached his ear. "It's full of guts."

"We'll get it open," the technician promised, "but not tonight."

Beam replaced the unit on the bench. He could, with bad luck, work days on this one item — to discover, after all, that it had nothing to do with the murder of Heimie Rosenburg. On the other hand …

"Drill me a hole in it," he instructed. "So we can see it."

His technician protested: "I drilled; the drill broke. I've sent out for an improved density. This substance is imported; somebody hooked it from a white dwarf system. It was conceived under stupendous pressure."

"You're stalling," Beam said, irritated. "That's how they talk in the advertising media."

The technician shrugged. “Anyhow, it’s extra hard. A naturally-evolved element, or an artificially-processed product from somebody’s labs. Who has funds to develop a metal like this?”

“One of the big slavers,” Beam said. “That’s where the wealth winds up. And they hop around to various systems … they’d have access to raw materials. Special ores.”

“Can’t I go home?” the technician asked. “What’s so important about this?”

“This device either killed or helped kill Heimie Rosenburg. We’ll sit here, you and I, until we get it open.” Beam seated himself and began examining the check sheet showing which tests had been applied. “Sooner or later it’ll fly open like a clam — if you can remember that far back.”

Behind them, a warning bell sounded.

“Somebody in the anteroom,” Beam said, surprised and wary. “At two-thirty?” He got up and made his way down the dark hall to the front of the building. Probably it was Ackers. His conscience stirred guiltily: somebody had logged the absence of the TV unit.

But it was not Ackers.

Waiting humbly in the cold, deserted anteroom was Paul Tirol; with him was an attractive young woman unknown to Beam. Tirol’s wrinkled face broke into smiles, and he extended a hearty hand. “Beam,” he said. They shook. “Your front door said you were down here. Still working?”

Guardedly, wondering who the woman was and what Tirol wanted, Beam said: “Catching up on some slipshod errors. Whole firm’s going broke.”

Tirol laughed indulgently. “Always a japer.” His deep-set eyes darted; Tirol was a powerfully-built person, older than most, with a somber, intensely-creased face. “Have room for a few contracts? I thought I might slip a few jobs your way… if you’re open.”

“I’m always open,” Beam countered, blocking Tirol’s view of the lab proper. The door, anyhow, had slid itself shut. Tirol had been Heimie’s boss … he no doubt felt entitled to all extant information on the murder. Who did it? When? How? Why? But that didn’t explain why he was *here*.

“Terrible thing,” Tirol said crudely. He made no move to introduce the woman; she had retired to the couch to light a cigarette. She was slender, with mahogany-colored hair; she wore a blue coat, and a kerchief tied around her head.

“Yes,” Beam agreed. “Terrible.”

“You were there, I understand.”

That explained some of it. “Well,” Beam conceded, “I showed up.”

“But you didn’t actually see it?”

“No,” Beam admitted, “nobody saw it. Interior is collecting specification material. They should have it down to one card before morning.”

Visibly, Tirol relaxed. “I’m glad of that. I’d hate to see the vicious criminal escape. Banishment’s too good for him. He ought to be gassed.”

“Barbarism,” Beam murmured dryly. “The days of the gas chamber. Medieval.”

Tirol peered past him. “You’re working on —” Now he was overtly beginning to pry. “Come now, Leroy. Heimie Rosenburg — God bless his

soul — was killed tonight and tonight I find you burning the midnight oil. You can talk openly with me; you've got something relevant to his death, haven't you?"

"That's Ackers you're thinking of."

Tirol chuckled. "Can I take a look?"

"Not until you start paying me; I'm not on your books yet."

In a strained, unnatural voice, Tirol bleated: "I want it."

Puzzled, Beam said: "You want what?"

With a grotesque shudder, Tirol blundered forward, shoved Beam aside, and groped for the door. The door flew open and Tirol started noisily down the dark corridor, feeling his way by instinct toward the research labs.

"Hey!" Beam shouted, outraged. He sprinted after the older man, reached the inner door, and prepared to fight it out. He was shaking, partly with amazement, partly with anger. "What the hell?" he demanded breathlessly. "You don't own me!"

Behind him the door mysteriously gave way. Foolishly, he sprawled backward, half-falling into the lab. There, stricken with helpless paralysis, was his technician. And, coming across the floor of the lab was something small and metallic. It looked like an oversized box of crackers, and it was going lickety-split toward Tirol. The object — metal and gleaming — hopped up into Tirol's arms, and the old man turned and lumbered back up the hall to the anteroom.

"What was it?" the technician said, coming to life.

Ignoring him, Beam hurried after Tirol. "He's got it!" he yelled futilely.

“It —” the technician mumbled. “It was the TV set. And it *ran.*”

II

The file banks at Interior were in agitated flux.

The process of creating a more and more restricted category was tedious, and it took time. Most of the Interior staff had gone home to bed; it was almost three in the morning, and the corridors and offices were deserted. A few mechanical cleaning devices crept here and there in the darkness. The sole source of life was the study chamber of the file banks. Edward Ackers sat patiently waiting for the results, waiting for specifications to come in, and for the file machinery to process them.

To his right a few Interior police played a benign lottery and waited stoically to be sent out for the pick-up. The lines of communication to Heimie Rosenburg's apartment buzzed ceaselessly. Down the street, along the bleak sidewalk, Harvey Garth was still at his propaganda booth, still flashing his BANISH it! sign and muttering in people's ears. There were virtually no passersby, now, but Garth went on. He was tireless; he never gave up.

"Psychopath," Ackers said resentfully. Even where he sat, six floors up, the tinny, carping voice reached his middle ear.

"Take him in," one of the game-playing cops suggested. The game, intricate and devious, was a version of a Centaurian III practice. "We can revoke his vendor's license."

Ackers had, when there was nothing else to do, concocted and refined an indictment of Garth, a sort of lay analysis of the man's mental aberrations. He enjoyed playing the psychoanalytic game; it gave him a sense of power.

Garth, Harvey

Prominent compulsive syndrome. Has assumed role of ideological anarchist, opposing legal and social system. No rational expression, only repetition of key words and phrases. Idee fixe is *Banish the banishment system.* Cause dominates life. Rigid fanatic, probably of manic type, since…

Ackers let the sentence go, since he didn't really know what the structure of the manic type was. Anyhow, the analysis was excellent, and someday it would be resting in an official slot instead of merely drifting through his mind. And, when that happened, the annoying voice would conclude.

"Big turmoil," Garth droned. "Banishment system in vast upheaval… crisis moment has arrived."

"Why crisis?" Ackers asked aloud.

Down below on the pavement Garth responded. "All your machines are humming. Grand excitement reigns. Somebody's head will be in the basket before sun-up." His voice trailed off in a weary blur. "Intrigue and murder. Corpses … the police scurry and a beautiful woman lurks." To his analysis Ackers added an amplifying clause.

…Garth's talents are warped by his compulsive sense of *mission.* Having designed an ingenious communication device he sees only its propaganda possibility. Whereas Garth's voice-ear mechanism could be put to work for All Humanity.

That pleased him. Ackers got up and wandered over to the attendant operating the file. "How's it coming?" he asked.

"Here's the situation," the attendant said. There was a line of gray stubble smeared over his chin, and he was bleary-eyed. "We're gradually paring it down."

Ackers, as he resumed his seat, wished he were back in the days of the almighty fingerprint. But a print hadn't shown up in months; a thousand techniques existed for print-removal and print alteration. There was no single specification capable, in itself, of delineating the individual. A composite was needed, a gestalt of the assembled data.

1) blood sample (type O) 6,139,481,601

2) shoe size (11 1/2) 1,268,303,431

3) smoker 791,992,386

3a) smoker (pipe) 52,774,853

4) sex (male) 26,449,094

5) age (30-40 years) 9,221,397

6) weight (200 lbs) 488,290

7) fabric of clothing 17,459

8) hair variety 866

9) ownership of utilized weapon 40

A vivid picture was emerging from the data. Ackers could see him clearly. The man was practically standing there, in front of his desk. A fairly young man, somewhat heavy, a man who smoked a pipe and wore an extremely expensive tweed suit. An individual created by nine specifications; no tenth had been listed because no more data of specification level had been found.

Now, according to the report, the apartment had been thoroughly searched. The detection equipment was going outdoors.

"One more should do it," Ackers said, returning the report to the attendant. He wondered if it would come in and how long it would take.

To waste time he telephoned his wife, but instead of getting Ellen he got the automatic response circuit. “Yes, sir,” it told him. “Mrs. Ackers has retired for the night. You may state a thirty-second message which will be transcribed for her attention tomorrow morning. Thank you.”

Ackers raged at the mechanism futilely and then hung up. He wondered if Ellen were really in bed; maybe she had, as often before, slipped out. But, after all, it was almost three o’clock in the morning. Any sane person would be asleep: only he and Garth were still at their little stations, performing their vital duties.

What had Garth meant by a “*beautiful woman”?*

“Mr. Ackers,” the attendant said, “there’s a tenth specification coming in over the wires.”

Hopefully, Ackers gazed up at the file bank. He could see nothing, of course; the actual mechanism occupied the underground levels of the building, and all that existed here was the input receptors and throw-out slots. But just looking at the machinery was in itself comforting. At this moment the bank was accepting the tenth piece of material. In a moment he would know how many citizens fell into the ten categories … he would know if already he had a group small enough to be sorted one by one.

“Here it is,” the attendant said, pushing the report to him.

Type of utilized vehicle (color) 7

“My God,” Ackers said mildly. “That’s low enough. Seven persons — we can go to work.”

“You want the seven cards popped?”

“Pop them,” Ackers said.

A moment later, the throw-out slot deposited seven neat white cards in the tray. The attendant passed them to Ackers and he quickly riffled them. The next step was personal motive and proximity: items that had to be gotten from the suspects themselves.

Of the seven names six meant nothing to him. Two lived on Venus, one in the Centaurus System, one was somewhere in Sirius, one was in the hospital, and one lived in the Soviet Union. The seventh, however, lived within a few miles, on the outskirts of New York.

LANTANO, DAVID

That clinched it. The gestalt, in Ackers' mind, locked clearly in place; the image hardened to reality. He had half expected, even prayed to see Lantano's card brought up.

"Here's your pick-up," he said shakily to the game-playing cops. "Better get as large a team together as possible, this one won't be easy." Momentously, he added: "Maybe I'd better come along."

Beam reached the anteroom of his lab as the ancient figure of Paul Tirol disappeared out the street door and onto the dark sidewalk. The young woman, trotting ahead of him, had climbed into a parked car and started it forward; as Tirol emerged, she swept him up and at once departed.

Panting, Beam stood impotently collecting himself on the deserted pavement. The ersatz TV unit was gone; now he had nothing. Aimlessly, he began to run down the street. His heels echoed loudly in the cold silence. No sign of them; no sign of anything.

"I'll be damned," he said, with almost religious awe. The unit — a robot device of obvious complexity — clearly belonged to Paul Tirol; as soon as it had identified his presence it had sprinted gladly to him. For… protection?

It had killed Heimie; and it belonged to Tirol. So, by a novel and indirect method, Tirol had murdered his employee, his Fifth Avenue front man. At a rough guess, such a highly-organized robot would cost in the neighborhood of a hundred thousand dollars.

A lot of money, considering that murder was the easiest of criminal acts. Why not hire an itinerant goon with a crowbar?

Beam started slowly back toward his lab. Then, abruptly, he changed his mind and turned in the direction of the business area. When a free-wheeling cab came by, he hailed it and clambered in.

“Where to, sport?” the starter at cab relay asked. City cabs were guided by remote control from one central source.

He gave the name of a specific bar. Settling back against the seat he pondered. Anybody could commit a murder; an expensive, complicated machine wasn’t necessary.

The machine had been built to do something else. The murder of Heimie Rosenburg was incidental.

Against the nocturnal skyline, a huge stone residence loomed. Ackers inspected it from a distance. There were no lights burning; everything was locked up tight. Spread out before the house was an acre of grass. David Lantano was probably the last person on Earth to own an acre of grass outright; it was less expensive to buy an entire planet in some other system.

“Let’s go,” Ackers commanded; disgusted by such opulence, he deliberately trampled through a bed of roses on his way up the wide porch steps. Behind him flowed the team of shock-police.

“Gosh,” Lantano rumbled, when he had been roused from his bed. He was a kindly-looking, rather youthful fat man, wearing now an abundant silk dressing robe. He would have seemed more in place as director of a

boys' summer camp; there was an expression of perpetual good humor on his soft, sagging face. "What's wrong, officer?"

Ackers loathed being called officer. "You're under arrest," he stated.

"Me?" Lantano echoed feebly. "Hey, officer, I've got lawyers to take care of these things." He yawned voluminously. "Care for some coffee?" Stupidly, he began puttering around his front room, fixing a pot.

It had been years since Ackers had splurged and bought himself a cup of coffee. With Terran land covered by dense industrial and residential installations there was no room for crops, and coffee had refused to "take" in any other system. Lantano probably grew his somewhere on an illicit plantation in South America — the pickers probably believed they had been transported to some remote colony.

"No thanks," Ackers said. "Let's get going."

Still dazed, Lantano plopped himself down in an easy chair and regarded Ackers with alarm. "You're serious." Gradually his expression faded; he seemed to be drifting back to sleep. "Who?" he murmured distantly.

"Heimie Rosenburg."

"No kidding." Lantano shook his head listlessly. "I always wanted him in my company. Heimie's got real charm. Had, I mean."

It made Ackers nervous to remain here in the vast lush mansion. The coffee was heating, and the smell of it tickled his nose. And, heaven forbid — there on the table was a basket *of apricots.*

"Peaches," Lantano corrected, noticing his fixed stare. "Help yourself."

"Where — did you get them?"

Lantano shrugged. “Synthetic dome. Hydroponics. I forget where … I don’t have a technical mind.”

“You know what the fine is for possessing natural fruit?”

“Look,” Lantano said earnestly, clasping his mushy hands together. “Give me the details on this affair, and I’ll prove to you I had nothing to do with it. Come on, officer.”

“Ackers,” Ackers said.

“Okay, Ackers. I thought I recognized you, but I wasn’t sure; didn’t want to make a fool of myself. When was Heimie killed?”

Grudgingly, Ackers gave him the pertinent information.

For a time Lantano was silent. Then, slowly, gravely, he said: “You better look at those seven cards again. One of those fellows isn’t in the Sirius System … he’s back here.”

Ackers calculated the chances of successfully banishing a man of David Lantano’s importance. His organization — Interplay Export — had fingers all over the galaxy; there’d be search crews going out like bees. But nobody went out banishment distance. The condemned, temporarily ionized, rendered in terms of charged particles of energy, radiated outward at the velocity of light. This was an experimental technique that had failed; it worked only one way.

“Consider,” Lantano said thoughtfully. “If I *was* going to kill Heimie — *would I do it myself?* You’re not being logical, Ackers. I’d send somebody.” He pointed a fleshy finger at Ackers. “You imagine I’d risk my own life? I know you pick up everybody … you usually turn up enough specifications.”

“We have ten on you,” Ackers said briskly.

“So you’re going to banish me?”

“If you’re guilty, you’ll have to face banishment like anyone else. Your particular prestige has no bearing.”

Nettled, Ackers added, “Obviously, you’ll be released. You’ll have plenty of opportunity to prove your innocence; you can question each of the ten specifications in turn.”

He started to go on and describe the general process of court procedure employed in the twenty-first century, but something made him pause. David Lantano and his chair seemed to be gradually sinking into the floor. Was it an illusion? Blinking, Ackers rubbed his eyes and peered. At the same time, one of the policemen yelped a warning of dismay; Lantano was quietly leaving them.

“Come back!” Ackers demanded; he leaped forward and grabbed hold of the chair. Hurriedly, one of his men shorted out the power supply of the building; the chair ceased descending and groaned to a halt. Only Lantano’s head was visible above the floor level. He was almost entirely submerged in a concealed escape shaft.

“What seedy, useless — ” Ackers began.

“I know,” Lantano admitted, making no move to drag himself up. He seemed resigned; his mind was again off in clouds of contemplation. “I hope we can clear all this up. Evidently I’m being framed. Tirol got somebody who looks like me, somebody to go in and murder Heimie.”

Ackers and the police crew helped him up from his depressed chair. He gave no resistance; he was too deep in his brooding.

The cab let Leroy Beam off in front of the bar. To his right, in the next block, was the Interior Building… and, on the sidewalk, the opaque blob that was Harvey Garth's propaganda booth.

Entering the bar, Beam found a table in the back and seated himself. Already he could pick up the faint, distorted murmur of Garth's reflections. Garth, speaking to himself in a directionless blur, was not yet aware of him.

"Banish it," Garth was saying. "Banish all of them. Bunch of crooks and thieves." Garth, in the miasma of his booth, was rambling vitriolically.

"What's going on?" Beam asked. "What's the latest?"

Garth's monologue broke off as he focussed his attention on Beam. "You in there? In the bar?"

"I want to find out about Heimie's death."

"Yes," Garth said. "He's dead; the files are moving, kicking out cards."

"When I left Heimie's apartment," Beam said, "they had turned up six specifications." He punched a button on the drink selector and dropped in a token.

"That must have been earlier," Garth said; "they've got more."

"How many?"

"Ten in all."

Ten. That was usually enough. And all ten of them laid out by a robot device … a little procession of hints strewn along its path: between the concrete side of the building and the dead body of Heimie Rosenburg.

“That’s lucky,” he said speculatively. “Helps out Ackers.”

“Since you’re paying me,” Garth said, “I’ll tell you the rest. They’ve already gone out on their pick-up: Ackers went along.”

Then the device had been successful. Up to a point, at least. He was sure of one thing: the device should have been out of the apartment. Tirol hadn’t known about Heimie’s death rattle; Heimie had been wise enough to do the installation privately.

Had the rattle not brought persons into the apartment, the device would have scuttled out and returned to Tirol. Then, no doubt, Tirol would have detonated it. Nothing would remain to indicate that a machine could lay down a trail of synthetic clues: blood type, fabric, pipe tobacco, hair… all the rest, and all spurious.

“Who’s the pick-up on?” Beam asked.

“David Lantano.”

Beam winced. “Naturally. That’s what the whole thing’s about; he’s being framed!”

Garth was indifferent; he was a hired employee, stationed by the pool of independent researchers to siphon information from the Interior Department. He had no actual interest in politics; his *Banish It!* was sheer window-dressing.

“I know it’s a frame,” Beam said, “and so does Lantano. But neither of us can prove it… unless Lantano has an absolutely airtight alibi.”

“Banish it,” Garth murmured, reverting to his routine. A small group of late-retiring citizens had strolled past his booth, and he was masking his conversation with Beam. The conversation, directed to the one listener, was

inaudible to everyone else; but it was better not to take risks. Sometimes, very close to the booth, there was an audible feedback of the signal.

Hunched over his drink, Leroy Beam contemplated the various items he could try. He could inform Lantano's organization, which existed relatively intact… but the result would be epic civil war. And, in addition, he didn't really care if Lantano was framed; it was all the same to him. Sooner or later one of the big slavers had to absorb the other: cartel is the natural conclusion of big business. With Lantano gone, Tirol would painlessly swallow his organization; everybody would be working at his desk as always.

On the other hand, there might someday be a device — now half-completed in Tirol's basement — that left a trail of *Leroy Beam* clues. Once the idea caught on, there was no particular end.

"And I had the damn thing," he said fruitlessly. "I hammered on it for five hours. It was a TV unit, then, but it was still the device that killed Heimie."

"You're positive it's gone?"

"It's not only gone — it's out of existence. Unless she wrecked the car driving Tirol home."

"She?" Garth asked.

"The woman." Beam pondered. "She saw it. Or she knew about it; she was with him." But, unfortunately, he had no idea who the woman might be.

"What'd she look like?" Garth asked.

"Tall, mahogany hair. Very nervous mouth."

“I didn’t realize she was working with him openly. They must have really needed the device.” Garth added: “You didn’t identify her? I guess there’s no reason why you should; she’s kept out of sight.”

“Who is she?”

“That’s Ellen Ackers.”

Beam laughed sharply. “And she’s driving Paul Tirol around?”

“She’s — well, she’s driving Tirol around, yes. You can put it that way.”

“How long?”

“I thought you were in on it. She and Ackers split up; that was last year. But he wouldn’t let her leave; he wouldn’t give her a divorce. Afraid of the publicity. Very important to keep up respectability… keep the shirt fully stuffed.”

“He knows about Paul Tirol and her?”

“Of course not. He knows she’s — spiritually hooked up. But he doesn’t care … as long as she keeps it quiet. It’s his position he’s thinking about.”

“If Ackers found out,” Beam murmured. “If he saw the link between his wife and Tirol… he’d ignore his ten interoffice memos. He’d *want* to haul in Tirol. The hell with the evidence; he could always collect that later.” Beam pushed away his drink; the glass was empty anyhow. “Where is Ackers?”

“I told you. Out at Lantano’s place, picking him up.”

“He’d come back here? He wouldn’t go home?”

“Naturally he’d come back here.” Garth was silent a moment. “I see a couple of Interior vans turning into the garage ramp. That’s probably the pick-up crew returning.”

Beam waited tensely. “Is Ackers along?”

“Yes, he’s there. *Banish It!”* Garth’s voice rose in stentorian frenzy. *“Banish the system of Banishment! Root out the crooks and pirates!”*

Sliding to his feet, Beam left the bar.

A dull light showed in the rear of Edward Ackers’ apartment: probably the kitchen light. The front door was locked. Standing in the carpeted hallway, Beam skillfully tilted with the door mechanism. It was geared to respond to specific neural patterns: those of its owners and a limited circle of friends. For him there was no activity.

Kneeling down, Beam switched on a pocket oscillator and started sine wave emission. Gradually, he increased the frequency. At perhaps 150,000 cps the lock guiltily clicked; that was all he needed. Switching the oscillator off, he rummaged through his supply of skeleton patterns until he located the closet cylinder. Slipped into the turret of the oscillator, the cylinder emitted a synthetic neural pattern close enough to the real thing to affect the lock.

The door swung open. Beam entered.

In half-darkness the living room seemed modest and tasteful. Ellen Ackers was an adequate housekeeper. Beam listened. Was she home at all? And if so, where? Awake? Asleep?

He peeped into the bedroom. There was the bed, but nobody was in it.

If she wasn’t here she was at Tirol’s. But he didn’t intend to follow her; this was as far as he cared to risk.

He inspected the dining room. Empty. The kitchen was empty, too. Next came an upholstered general-purpose rumpus room; on one side was a gaudy bar and on the other a wall-to-wall couch. Tossed on the couch was a woman's coat, purse, gloves. Familiar clothes: Ellen Ackers had worn them. So she had come here after leaving his research lab.

The only room left was the bathroom. He fumbled with the knob; it was locked from the inside. There was no sound, but somebody was on the other side of the door. He could sense her in there.

"Ellen," he said, against the panelling. "Mrs. Ellen Ackers; is that you?"

No answer. He could sense her not making any sound at all: a stifled, frantic silence.

While he was kneeling down, fooling with his pocketful of magnetic lock-pullers, an explosive pellet burst through the door at head level and splattered into the plaster of the wall beyond.

Instantly the door flew open; there stood Ellen Ackers, her face distorted with fright. One of her husband's government pistols was clenched in her small, bony hand. She was less than a foot from him. Without getting up, Beam grabbed her wrist; she fired over his head, and then the two of them deteriorated into harsh, labored breathing.

"Come on," Beam managed finally. The nozzle of the gun was literally brushing the top of his head. To kill him, she would have to pull the pistol back against her. But he didn't let her; he kept hold of her wrist until finally, reluctantly, she dropped the gun. It clattered to the floor and he got stiffly up.

"You were sitting down," she whispered, in a stricken, accusing voice.

“Kneeling down: picking the lock. I’m glad you aimed for my brain.” He picked up the gun and succeeded in getting it into his overcoat pocket; his hands were shaking.

Ellen Ackers gazed at him starkly; her eyes were huge and dark, and her face was an ugly white. Her skin had a dead cast, as if it were artificial, totally dry, thoroughly sifted with talc. She seemed on the verge of hysteria; a harsh, muffled shudder struggled up inside her, lodging finally in her throat. She tried to speak but only a rasping noise came out.

“Gee, lady,” Beam said, embarrassed. “Come in the kitchen and sit down.”

She stared at him as if he had said something incredible or obscene or miraculous; he wasn’t sure which.

“Come on.” He tried to take hold of her arm but she jerked frantically away. She had on a simple green suit, and in it she looked very nice; a little too thin and terribly tense, but still attractive. She had on expensive earrings, an imported stone that seemed always in motion … but otherwise her outfit was austere.

“You — were the man at the lab,” she managed, in a brittle, choked voice.

“I’m Leroy Beam. An independent.” Awkwardly guiding her, he led her into the kitchen and seated her at the table. She folded her hands in front of her and studied them fixedly; the bleak boniness of her face seemed to be increasing rather than receding. He felt uneasy.

“Are you all right?” he asked.

She nodded.

“Cup of coffee?” He began searching the cupboards for a bottle of Venusian-grown coffee substitute. While he was looking, Ellen Ackers said tautiy: “You better go in there. In the bathroom. I don’t think he’s dead, but he might be.”

Beam raced into the bathroom. Behind the plastic shower curtain was an opaque shape. It was Paul Tirol, lying wadded up in the tub, fully clothed. He was not dead but he had been struck behind the left ear and his scalp was leaking a slow, steady trickle of blood. Beam took his pulse, listened to his breathing, and then straightened up.

At the doorway Ellen Ackers materialized, still pale with fright. “Is he? Did I kill him?”

“He’s fine.”

Visibly, she relaxed. “Thank God. It happened so fast — he stepped ahead of me to take the *M* inside his place, and then I did it. I hit him as lightly as I could. He was so interested in it… he forgot about me.” Words spilled from her, quick, jerky sentences, punctuated by rigid tremors of her hands. “I lugged him back in the car and drove here; it was all I could think of.”

“What are you in this for?”

Her hysteria rose in a spasm of convulsive muscle-twitching. “It was all planned — I had *everything* worked out. As soon as I got hold of it I was going to —” She broke off.

“Blackmail Tirol?” he asked, fascinated.

She smiled weakly. “No, not Paul. It was Paul who gave me the idea … it was his first idea, when his researchers showed him the thing. The *M*, he calls it. *M* stands for machine. He means it can’t be educated, morally corrected.”

Incredulous, Beam said: “You were going to blackmail your husband.”

Ellen Ackers nodded. “So he’d let me leave.”

Suddenly Beam felt sincere respect for her. “My God — the rattle. Heimie didn’t arrange that; *you* did. So the device would be trapped in the apartment.”

“Yes,” she agreed. “I was going to pick it up. But Paul showed up with other ideas; he wanted it, too.”

“What went haywire? You have it, don’t you?”

Silently she indicated the linen closet. “I stuffed it away when I heard you.”

Beam opened the linen closet. Resting primly on the neatly-folded towels was a small, familiar, portable TV unit.

“It’s reverted,” Ellen said, from behind him, in an utterly defeated monotone. “As soon as I hit Paul it changed. For half an hour I’ve been trying to get it to shift. It won’t. It’ll stay that way forever.”

III

Beam went to the telephone and called a doctor. In the bathroom, Tirol groaned and feebly thrashed his arms. He was beginning to return to consciousness.

"Was that necessary?" Ellen Ackers demanded. "The doctor — did you have to call?"

Beam ignored her. Bending, he lifted the portable TV unit and held it in his hands; he felt its weight move up his arms like a slow, leaden fatigue. The ultimate adversary, he thought; too stupid to be defeated. It was worse than an animal. It was a rock, solid and dense, lacking all qualities. Except, he thought, the quality of determination. It was determined to persist, to survive; a rock with will. He felt as if he were holding up the universe, and he put the unreconstructed M down.

From behind him Ellen said: "It drives you crazy." Her voice had regained tone. She lit a cigarette with a silver cigarette lighter and then shoved her hands in the pockets of her suit.

"Yes," he said.

"There's nothing you can do, is there? You tried to get it open before. They'll patch Paul up, and he'll go back to his place, and Lantano will be banished —" She took a deep shuddering breath. "And the Interior Department will go on as always."

"Yes," he said. Still kneeling, he surveyed the M. Now, with what he knew, he did not waste time struggling with it. He considered it impassively; he did not even bother to touch it.

In the bathroom, Paul Tirol was trying to crawl from the tub. He slipped back, cursed and moaned, and started his laborious ascent once again.

“Ellen?” his voice quavered, a dim and distorted sound, like dry wires rubbing.

“Take it easy,” she said between her teeth; not moving she stood smoking rapidly on her cigarette.

“Help me, Ellen,” Tirol muttered. “Something happened to me … I don’t remember what. Something hit me.”

“He’ll remember,” Ellen said.

Beam said: “I can take this thing to Ackers as it is. You can tell him what it’s for — what it did. That ought to be enough; he won’t go through with Lantano.”

But he didn’t believe it, either. Ackers would have to admit a mistake, a basic mistake, and if he had been wrong to pick up Lantano, he was ruined. And so, in a sense, was the whole system of delineation. It could be fooled; it had been fooled. Ackers was rigid, and he would go right on in a straight line: the hell with Lantano. The hell with abstract justice. Better to preserve cultural continuity and keep society running on an even keel.

“Tirol’s equipment,” Beam said. “Do you know where it is?”

She shrugged wildly. “What equipment?”

“This thing — ” he jabbed at the M — “was made somewhere.”

“Not here, Tirol didn’t make it.”

“All right,” he said reasonably. They had perhaps six minutes more before the doctor and the emergency medical carrier arrived on rooftop.

“Who did make it?”

“The alloy was developed on Bellatrix.” She spoke jerkily, word by word. “The rind … forms a skin on the outside, a bubble that gets sucked in and out of a reservoir. That’s its rind, the TV shape. It sucks it back and becomes the M; it’s ready to act.”

“What made it?” he repeated.

“A Bellatrix machine tool syndicate … a subsidiary of Tirol’s organization. They’re made to be watchdogs. The big plantations on outplanets use them; they patrol. They get poachers.”

Beam said: “Then originally they’re not set for one person.”

“No.”

“Then *who* set this for Heimie? Not a machine tool syndicate.”

“That was done here.”

He straightened up and lifted the portable TV unit. “Let’s go. Take me there, where Tirol had it altered.”

For a moment the woman did not respond. Grabbing her arm he hustled her to the door. She gasped and stared at him mutely.

“Come on,” he said, pushing her out into the hall. The portable TV unit bumped against the door as he shut it; he held the unit tight and followed after Ellen Ackers.

The town was slatternly and rundown, a few retail stores, fuel station, bars and dance halls. It was two hours’ flight from Greater New York and it was called Olum.

“Turn right,” Ellen said listlessly. She gazed out at the neon signs and rested her arm on the window sill of the ship.

They flew above warehouses and deserted streets. Lights were few. At an intersection Ellen nodded and he set the ship down on a roof.

Below them was a sagging, fly-specked wooden frame store. A peeling sign was propped up in the window: FULTON BROTHERS locksmiths. With the sign were doorknobs, locks, keys, saws, and spring-wound alarm clocks. Somewhere in the interior of the store a yellow night light burned fitfully.

“This way,” Ellen said. She stepped from the ship and made her way down a flight of rickety wooden stairs. Beam laid the portable TV unit on the floor of the ship, locked the doors, and then followed after the woman. Holding onto the railing, he descended to a back porch on which were trash cans and a pile of sodden newspapers tied with string. Ellen was unlocking a door and feeling her way inside.

First he found himself in a musty, cramped storeroom. Pipe and rolls of wire and sheets of metal were heaped everywhere; it was like a junkyard. Next came a narrow corridor and then he was standing in the entrance of a workshop. Ellen reached overhead and groped to find the hanging string of a light. The light clicked on. To the right was a long and littered workbench with a hand grinder at one end, a vise, a keyhole saw; two wooden stools were before the bench and half-assembled machinery was stacked on the floor in no apparent order. The workshop was chaotic, dusty, and archaic. On the wall was a threadbare blue coat hung from a nail: the workcoat of a machinist.

“Here,” Ellen said, with bitterness. “This is where Paul had it brought. This outfit is owned by the Tirol organization; this whole slum is part of their holdings.”

Beam walked to the bench. “To have altered it,” he said, “Tirol must have had a plate of Heimie’s neural pattern.” He overturned a heap of glass

jars; screws and washers poured onto the pitted surface of the bench.

“He got it from Heimie’s door,” Ellen said. “He had Heimie’s lock analyzed and Heimie’s pattern inferred from the setting of the tumblers.”

“And he had the M opened?”

“There’s an old mechanic,” Ellen said. “A little dried-up old man; he runs this shop. Patrick Fulton. He installed the bias on the M.”

“A bias,” Beam said, nodding.

“A bias against killing people. Heimie was the exception, for everybody else it took its protective form. Out in the wilds they would have set it for something else, not a TV unit.” She laughed, a sudden ripple close to hysteria. “Yes, that would have looked odd, it sitting out in a forest somewhere, a TV unit. They would have made it into a rock or a stick.”

“A rock,” Beam said. He could imagine it. The M waiting, covered with moss, waiting for months, years, and then weathered and corroded, finally picking up the presence of a human being. Then the M ceasing to be a rock, becoming, in a quick blur of motion, a box one foot wide and two feet long. An oversized cracker box that started forward —

But there was something missing. “The fakery,” he said. “Emitting flakes of paint and hair and tobacco. How did that come in?”

In a brittle voice Ellen said: “The landowner murdered the poacher, and he was culpable in the eyes of the law. So the M left clues. Claw marks. Animal blood. Animal hair.”

“God,” he said, revolted. “Killed by an animal.”

“A bear, a wildcat — whatever was indigenous, it varied. The predator of the region, a natural death.” With her toe she touched a cardboard carton

under the workbench. “It’s in there, it used to be, anyhow. The neural plate, the transmitter, the discarded parts of the M, the schematics.”

The carton had been a shipping container for power packs. Now the packs were gone, and in their place was a carefully-wrapped inner box, sealed against moisture and insect infestation. Beam tore away the metal foil and saw that he had found what he wanted. He gingerly carried the contents out and spread them on the workbench among the soldering irons and drills.

“It’s all there,” Ellen said, without emotion.

“Maybe,” he said, “I can leave you out of this. I can take this and the TV unit to Ackers and try it without your testimony.”

“Sure,” she said wearily.

“What are you going to do?”

“Well,” she said, “I can’t go back to Paul, so I guess there’s not much I can do.”

“The blackmail bit was a mistake,” he said.

Her eyes glowed. “Okay.”

“If he releases Lantano,” Beam said, “he’ll be asked to resign. Then he’ll probably give you your divorce, it won’t be important to him one way or another.”

“I —” she began. And then she stopped. Her face seemed to fade, as if the color and texture of her flesh was vanishing from within. She lifted one hand and half-turned, her mouth open and the sentence still unfinished.

Beam, reaching, slapped the overhead light out; the workroom winked into darkness. He had heard it too, had heard it at the same time as Ellen Ackers. The rickety outside porch had creaked and now the slow, ponderous motion was past the storeroom and into the hall.

A heavy man, he thought. A slow-moving man, sleepy, making his way step by step, his eyes almost shut, his great body sagging beneath his suit. Beneath, he thought, his expensive tweed suit. In the darkness the man's shape was looming; Beam could not see it but he could sense it there, filling up the doorway as it halted. Boards creaked under its weight. In a daze he wondered if Ackers already knew, if his order had already been rescinded. Or had the man got out on his own, worked through his own organization?

The man, starting forward again, spoke in a deep, husky voice. "Ugh," Lantano said. "Damn it."

Ellen began to shriek. Beam still did not realize what it was; he was still fumbling for the light and wondering stupidly why it did not come on. He had smashed the bulb, he realized. He lit a match; the match went out and he grabbed for Ellen Ackers' cigarette lighter. It was in her purse, and it took him an agonized second to get it out.

The unreconstructed M was approaching them slowly, one receptor stalk extended. Again it halted, swiveled to the left until it was facing the workbench. It was not now in the shape of a portable TV unit; it had retaken its cracker-box shape.

"The plate," Ellen Ackers whispered. "It responded to the plate."

The M had been roused by Heimie Rosenburg's looking for it. But Beam still felt the presence of David Lantano. The big man was still here in the room; the sense of heaviness, the proximity of weight and ponderousness had arrived with the machine, as it moved, sketching Lantano's existence. As he fixedly watched, the machine produced a fragment of cloth fabric and pressed it into a nearby heap of grid-mesh. Other elements, blood and tobacco and hair, were being produced, but they

were too small for him to see. The machine pressed a heel mark into the dust of the floor and then projected a nozzle from its anterior section.

Her arm over her eyes, Ellen Ackers ran away. But the machine was not interested in her; revolving in the direction of the workbench it raised itself and fired. An explosive pellet, released by the nozzle, traveled across the workbench and entered the debris heaped across the bench. The pellet detonated; bits of wire and nails showered in particles.

Heimie's dead, Beam thought, and went on watching. The machine was searching for the plate, trying to locate and destroy the synthetic neural emission. It swiveled, lowered its nozzle hesitantly, and then fired again. Behind the workbench, the wall burst and settled into itself.

Beam, holding the cigarette lighter, walked toward the M. A receptor stalk waved toward him and the machine retreated. Its lines wavered, flowed, and then painfully reformed. For an interval, the device struggled with itself; then, reluctantly, the portable TV unit again became visible. From the machine a high-pitched whine emerged, an anguished squeal. Conflicting stimuli were present; the machine was unable to make a decision.

The machine was developing a situation neurosis and the ambivalence of its response was destroying it. In a way its anguish had a human quality, but he could not feel sorry for it. It was a mechanical contraption trying to assume a posture of disguise and attack at the same time; the breakdown was one of relays and tubes, not of a living brain. And it had been a living brain into which it had fired its original pellet. Heimie Rosenburg was dead, and there were no more like him and no possibility that more could be assembled. He went over to the machine and nudged it onto its back with his foot.

The machine whirred snake-like and spun away. "Ugh, damn it!" it said. It showered bits of tobacco as it rolled off; drops of blood and flakes of blue enamel fell from it as it disappeared into the corridor. Beam could hear it

moving about, bumping into the walls like a blind, damaged organism. After a moment he followed after it.

In the corridor, the machine was traveling in a slow circle. It was erecting around itself a wall of particles: cloth and hairs and burnt matches and bits of tobacco, the mass cemented together with blood.

“Ugh, damn it,” the machine said in its heavy masculine voice. It went on working, and Beam returned to the other room.

“Where’s a phone?” he said to Ellen Ackers.

She stared at him vacantly.

“It won’t hurt you,” he said. He felt dull and worn-out. “It’s in a closed cycle. It’ll go on until it runs down.”

“It went crazy,” she said. She shuddered.

“No,” he said. “Regression. It’s trying to hide.”

From the corridor the machine said, “Ugh. Damn it.” Beam found the phone and called Edward Ackers.

Banishment for Paul Tirol meant first a procession of bands of darkness and then a protracted, infuriating interval in which empty matter drifted randomly around him, arranging itself into first one pattern and then another.

The period between the time Ellen Ackers attacked him and the time banishment sentence had been pronounced was vague and dim in his mind. Like the present shadows, it was hard to pin down.

He had — he thought — awakened in Ackers' apartment. Yes, that was it; and Leroy Beam was there, too. A sort of transcendental Leroy Beam who hovered robustly around, arranging everybody in configurations of his choice. A doctor had come. And finally Edward Ackers had shown up to face his wife and the situation.

Bandaged, and on his way into Interior, he had caught a glimpse of a man going out. The ponderous, bulbous shape of David Lantano, on his way home to his luxurious stone mansion and acre of grass.

At sight of him Tirol had felt a goad of fear. Lantano hadn't even noticed him; an acutely thoughtful expression on his face, Lantano padded into a waiting car and departed.

"You have one thousand dollars," Edward Ackers was saying wearily, during the final phase. Distorted, Ackers' face bloomed again in the drifting shadows around Tirol, an image of the man's last appearance. Ackers, too, was ruined, but in a different way. "The law supplies you with one thousand dollars to meet your immediate needs, also you'll find a pocket dictionary of representative outsystem dialects."

Ionization itself was painless. He had no memory of it; only a blank space darker than the blurred images on either side.

"You hate me," he had declared accusingly, his last words to Ackers. "I destroyed you. But… it wasn't you." He had been confused. "Lantano. Maneuvered but not. How? You did …"

But Lantano had had nothing to do with it. Lantano had shambled off home, a withdrawn spectator throughout. The hell with Lantano. The hell with Ackers and Leroy Beam and — reluctantly — the hell with Mrs. Ellen Ackers.

"Wow," Tirol babbled, as his drifting body finally collected physical shape. "We had a lot of good times … didn't we, Ellen?"

And then a roaring hot field of sunlight was radiating down on him. Stupefied, he sat slumped over, limp and passive. Yellow, scalding sunlight… everywhere. Nothing but the dancing heat of it, blinding him, cowing him into submission.

He was sprawled in the middle of a yellow clay road. To his right was a baking, drying field of corn wilted in the midday heat. A pair of large, disreputable-looking birds wheeled silently overhead. A long way off was a line of blunted hills: ragged troughs and peaks that seemed nothing more than heaps of dust. At their base was a meager lump of man-made buildings.

At least he *hoped* they were man-made.

As he climbed shakily to his feet, a feeble noise drifted to his ears. Coming down the hot, dirty road was a car of some sort. Apprehensive and cautious, Tirol walked to meet it.

The driver was human, a thin, almost emaciated youth with pebbled black skin and a heavy mass of weed-colored hair. He wore a stained canvas shirt and overalls. A bent, unlit cigarette hung from his lower lip. The car was a combustion-driven model and had rolled out of the twentieth century; battered and twisted, it rattled to a halt as the driver critically inspected Tirol. From the car’s radio yammered a torrent of tinny dance music.

“You a tax collector?” the driver asked.

“Certainly not,” Tirol said, knowing the bucolic hostility toward tax collectors. But — he floundered. He couldn’t confess that he was a banished criminal from Earth; that was an invitation to be massacred, usually in some picturesque way. “I’m an inspector,” he announced, “Department of Health.”

Satisfied, the driver nodded. “Lots of scuttly cutbeede, these days. You fellows got a spray, yet? Losing one crop after another.”

Tirol gratefully climbed into the car. “I didn’t realize the sun was so hot,” he murmured.

“You’ve got an accent,” the youth observed, starting up the engine. “Where you from?”

“Speech impediment,” Tirol said cagily. “How long before we reach town?”

“Oh, maybe an hour,” the youth answered, as the car wandered lazily forward.

Tirol was afraid to ask the name of the planet. It would give him away. But he was consumed with the need to know. He might be two star-systems away or two million; he might be a month out of Earth or seventy years. Naturally, he had to get back; he had no intention of becoming a sharecropper on some backwater colony planet.

“Pretty swip,” the youth said, indicating the torrent of noxious jazz pouring from the car radio. “That’s Calamine Freddy and his Woolybear Creole Original Band. Know that tune?”

“No,” Tirol muttered. The sun and dryness and heat made his head ache, and he wished to God he knew where he was.

The town was miserably tiny. The houses were dilapidated; the streets were dirt. A kind of domestic chicken roamed here and there, pecking in the rubbish. Under a porch a bluish quasi-dog lay sleeping. Perspiring and unhappy, Paul Tirol entered the bus station and located a schedule. A series of meaningless entries flashed by: names of towns. The name of the planet, of course, was not listed.

“What’s the fare to the nearest port?” he asked the indolent official behind the ticket window.

The official considered. “Depends on what sort of port you want. Where you planning to go?”

“Toward Center,” Tirol said. “Center” was the term used in outsystems for the Sol Group.

Dispassionately, the official shook his head. “No intersystem port around here.”

Tirol was baffled. Evidently, he wasn’t on the hub planet of this particular system. “Well,” he said, “then the nearest interplan port.”

The official consulted a vast reference book. “You want to go to which system-member?”

“Whichever one has the intersystem port,” Tirol said patiently. He would leave from there.

“That would be Venus.”

Astonished, Tirol said: “Then this system — ” He broke off, chagrined, as he remembered. It was the parochial custom in many outsystems, especially those a long way out, to name their member planets after the original nine. This one was probably called “Mars” or “Jupiter” or “Earth,” depending on its position in the group. “Fine,” Tirol finished. “One-way ticket to — Venus.”

Venus, or what passed for Venus, was a dismal orb no larger than an asteroid. A bleak cloud of metallic haze hung over it, obscuring the sun. Except for mining and smelting operations the planet was deserted. A few dreary shacks dotted the barren countryside. A perpetual wind blew, scattering debris and trash.

But the intersystem port was here, the field which linked the planet to its nearest star-neighbor and, ultimately, with the balance of the universe. At the moment a giant freighter was taking ore.

Tirol entered the ticket office. Spreading out most of his remaining money he said: “I want a one-way ticket taking me toward Center. As far as I can go.”

The clerk calculated. “You care what class?”

“No,” he said, mopping his forehead.

“How fast?”

“No.”

The clerk said: “That’ll carry you as far as the Betelgeuse System.”

“Good enough,” Tirol said, wondering what he did then. But at least he could contact his organization from there; he was already back in the charted universe. But now he was almost broke. He felt a prickle of icy fear, despite the heat.

The hub planet of the Betelgeuse System was called Plantagenet III. It was a thriving junction for passenger carriers transporting settlers to undeveloped colony planets. As soon as Tirol’s ship landed he hurried across the field to the taxi stand.

“Take me to Tirol Enterprises,” he instructed, praying there was an outlet here. There had to be, but it might be operating under a front name. Years ago he lost track of the particulars of his sprawling empire.

“Tirol Enterprises,” the cab driver repeated thoughtfully. “Nope, no such outfit, mister.”

Stunned, Tirol said: “Who does the slaving around here?”

The driver eyed him. He was a wizened, dried-up little man with glasses; he peered turtle-wise, without compassion. “Well,” he said, “I’ve been told you can get carried outsystem without papers. There’s a shipping contractor… called —” He reflected. Tirol, trembling, handed him a last bill.

“The Reliable Export-Import,” the driver said.

That was one of Lantano’s fronts. In horror Tirol said: “And that’s it?”

The driver nodded.

Dazed, Tirol moved away from the cab. The buildings of the field danced around him; he settled down on a bench to catch his breath. Under his coat his heart pounded unevenly. He tried to breathe, but his breath caught painfully in his throat. The bruise on his head where Ellen Ackers had hit him began to throb. It was true, and he was gradually beginning to understand and believe it. He was not going to get to Earth; he was going to spend the rest of his life here on this rural world, cut off from his organization and everything he had built up over the years.

And, he realized, as he sat struggling to breathe, the rest of his life was not going to be very long.

He thought about Heimie Rosenburg.

“Betrayed,” he said, and coughed wrackingly. “You betrayed me. You hear that? Because of you I’m here. It’s your fault; I never should have hired you.”

He thought about Ellen Ackers. “You too,” he gasped, coughing. Sitting on the bench he alternately coughed and gasped and thought about the

people who had betrayed him. There were hundreds of them.

The living room of David Lantano's house was furnished in exquisite taste. Priceless late nineteenth century Blue Willow dishes lined the walls in a rack of wrought iron. At his antique yellow plastic and chrome table, David Lantano was eating dinner, and the spread of food amazed Beam even more than the house.

Lantano was in good humor and he ate with enthusiasm. His linen napkin was tucked under his chin and once, as he sipped coffee, he dribbled and belched. His brief period of confinement was over; he ate to make up for the ordeal.

He had been informed, first by his own apparatus and now by Beam, that banishment had successfully carried Tirol past the point of return. Tirol would not be coming back and for that Lantano was thankful. He felt expansive toward Beam; he wished Beam would have something to eat.

Moodily, Beam said: "It's nice here."

"You could have something like this," Lantano said.

On the wall hung a framed folio of ancient paper protected by helium-filled glass. It was the first printing of a poem of Ogden Nash, a collector's item that should have been in a museum. It aroused in Beam a mixed feeling of longing and aversion.

"Yes," Beam said. "I could have this." This, he thought, or Ellen Ackers or the job at Interior or perhaps all three at once. Edward Ackers had been retired on pension and he had given his wife a divorce. Lantano was out of jeopardy. Tirol had been banished. He wondered what he did want.

"You could go a long way," Lantano said sleepily.

"As far as Paul Tirol?"

Lantano chuckled and yawned.

“I wonder if he left any family,” Beam said. “Any children.” He was thinking about Heimie.

Lantano reached across the table toward the bowl of fruit. He selected a peach and carefully brushed it against the sleeve of his robe. “Try a peach,” he said.

“No thanks,” Beam said irritably.

Lantano examined the peach but he did not eat it. The peach was made of wax; the fruit in the bowl was imitation. He was not really as rich as he pretended, and many of the artifacts about the living room were fakes. Each time he offered fruit to a visitor he took a calculated risk. Returning the peach to the bowl he leaned back in his chair and sipped his coffee.

If Beam did not have plans, at least *he* had, and with Tirol gone the plans had a better than even chance of working out. He felt peaceful. Someday, he thought, and not too far off, the fruit in the bowl would be real.

Explorers We

“Golly,” Parkhurst gasped, his red face tingling with excitement. “Come here, you guys. Look!”

They crowded around the viewscreen.

“There she is,” Barton said. His heart beat strangely. “She sure looks good.”

“Damn right she looks good,” Leon agreed. He trembled. “Say — I can make out New York.”

“The hell you can.”

“I can! The gray. By the water.”

“That’s not even the United States. We’re looking at it upside down. That’s Siam.”

The ship hurtled through space, meteoroid shields shrieking. Below it, the blue-green globe swelled. Clouds drifted around it, hiding the continents and oceans.

“I never expected to see her again,” Merriweather said. “I thought sure as hell we were stuck up there.” His face twisted. “Mars. That damned red waste. Sun and flies and ruins.”

“Barton knows how to repair jets,” Captain Stone said. “You can thank *him.*”

“You know what I’m going to do, first thing I’m back?” Parkhurst yelled.

“What?”

“Go to Coney Island.”

“Why?”

“People. I want to see people again. Lots of them. Dumb, sweaty, noisy. Ice cream and water. The ocean. Beer bottles, milk cartons, paper napkins __”

“And gals,” Vecchi said, eyes shining. “Long time, six months. I’ll go with you. We’ll sit on the beach and watch the gals.”

“I wonder what kind of bathing suits they got now,” Barton said.

“Maybe they don’t wear any!” Parkhurst cried.

“Hey!” Merriweather shouted. “I’m going to see my wife again.” He was suddenly dazed. His voice sank to a whisper. “My wife.”

“I got a wife, too,” Stone said. He grinned. “But I been married a long time.” Then he thought of Pat and Jean. A stabbing ache choked his windpipe. “I bet they have grown.”

“Grown?”

“My kids,” Stone said huskily.

They looked at each other, six men, ragged, bearded, eyes bright and feverish.

“How long?” Vecchi whispered.

“An hour,” Stone said. “We’ll be down in an hour.”

The ship struck with a crash that threw them on their faces. It leaped and bucked, brake jets screaming, tearing through rocks and soil. It came to rest, nose buried in a hillside.

Silence.

Parkhurst got unsteadily to his feet. He caught hold of the safety rail. Blood dripped down his face from a cut over his eye.

“We’re down,” he said.

Barton stirred. He groaned, forced himself up on his knees. Parkhurst helped him. “Thanks. Are we …”

“We’re down. We’re back.”

The jets were off. The roaring had ceased… there was only the faint trickle of wall fluids leaking out on the ground.

The ship was a mess. The hull was cracked in three places. It billowed in, bent and twisted. Papers and ruined instruments were strewn everywhere.

Vecchi and Stone got slowly up. “Everything all right?” Stone muttered, feeling his arm.

“Give me a hand,” Leon said. “My damn ankle’s twisted or something.”

They got him up. Merriweather was unconscious. They revived him and got him to his feet.

“We’re down,” Parkhurst repeated, as if he couldn’t believe it. “This is Earth. We’re back — alive!”

“I hope the specimens are all right,” Leon said.

“The hell with the specimens!” Vecchi shouted excitedly. He worked the port bolts frantically, unscrewing the heavy hatch lock. “Let’s get out and walk around.”

“Where are we?” Barton asked Captain Stone.

“South of San Francisco. On the peninsula.”

“San Francisco! Hey — we can ride the cable cars!” Parkhurst helped Vecchi unscrew the hatch. “San Francisco. I was through Frisco once. They got a big park. Golden Gate Park. We can go to the funhouse.”

The hatch opened, swinging wide. Talk ceased abruptly. The men peered out, blinking in the white-hot sunlight.

A green field stretched down and away from them. Hills rose in the distance, sharp in the crystal air. Along a highway below, a few cars moved, tiny dots, the sun glinting on them. Telephone poles.

“What’s that sound?” Stone said, listening intently.

“A train.”

It was coming along the distant track, black smoke pouring from its stack. A faint wind moved across the field, stirring the grass. Over to the right lay a town. Houses and trees. A theater marquee. A Standard gas station. Roadside stands. A motel.

“Think anybody saw us?” Leon asked. “Must have.”

“Sure heard us,” Parkhurst said. “We made a noise like God’s indigestion when we hit.”

Vecchi stepped out onto the field. He swayed wildly, arms outstretched. “I’m falling!”

Stone laughed. “You’ll get used to it. We’ve been in space too long. Come on.” He leaped down. “Let’s start walking.”

“Toward the town.” Parkhurst fell in beside him. “Maybe they’ll give us free eats … Hell — champagne!” His chest swelled under his tattered uniform. “Returning heroes. Keys to the town. A parade. Military band. Floats with dames.”

“Dames,” Leon grunted. “You’re obsessed.”

“Sure.” Parkhurst strode across the field, the others trailing after him. “Hurry up!”

“Look,” Stone said to Leon. “Somebody over there. Watching us.”

“Kids,” Barton said. “A bunch of kids.” He laughed excitedly. “Let’s go say hello.”

They headed toward the kids, wading through the moist grass on the rich earth.

“Must be spring,” Leon said. “The air smells like spring.” He took a deep breath. “And the grass.”

Stone computed. “It’s April ninth.”

They hurried. The kids stood watching them, silent and unmoving.

“Hey!” Parkhurst shouted. “We’re back!”

“What town is this?” Barton shouted.

The kids stared at them, eyes wide.

“What’s wrong?” Leon muttered.

“Our beards. We look pretty bad.” Stone cupped his hands. “Don’t be scared! We’re back from Mars. The rocket flight. Two years ago — remember? A year ago last October.”

The kids stared, white-faced. Suddenly they turned and fled. They ran frantically toward the town.

The six men watched them go.

“What the hell,” Parkhurst muttered, dazed. “What’s the matter?”

“Our beards,” Stone repeated uneasily.

“Something’s wrong,” Barton said, shakily. He began to tremble. “There’s something terribly wrong.”

“Can it!” Leon snapped. “It’s our beards.” He ripped a piece of his shirt savagely away. “We’re dirty. Filthy tramps. Come on.” He started after the children, toward the town. “Let’s go. They probably got a special car on the way here. We’ll meet them.”

Stone and Barton glanced at each other. They followed Leon slowly. The others fell in behind.

Silent, uneasy, the six bearded men made their way across the field toward the town.

A youth on a bicycle fled at their approach. Some railroad workers, repairing the train track, threw down their shovels and ran, yelling.

Numbly, the six men watched them go.

"What is it?" Parkhurst muttered.

They crossed the track. The town lay on the other side. They entered a huge grove of eucalyptus trees.

"Burlingame," Leon said, reading a sign. They looked down a street. Hotels and cafes. Parked cars. Gas stations. Dime stores. A small suburban town, shoppers on the sidewalks. Cars moving slowly.

They emerged from the trees. Across the street a filling station attendant looked up —

And froze.

After a moment, he dropped the hose he held and ran down the main street, shouting shrill warnings.

Cars stopped. Drivers leaped out and ran. Men and women poured out of stores, scattering wildly. They surged away, retreating in frantic haste.

In a moment the street was deserted.

"Good God." Stone advanced, bewildered. "What — " He crossed onto the street. No one was in sight.

The six men walked down the main street, dazed and silent. Nothing stirred. Everyone had fled. A siren wailed, rising and falling. Down a side street a car backed quickly away.

In an upstairs window Barton saw a pale, frightened face. Then the shade was jerked down.

“I don’t understand,” Vecchi muttered.

“Have they gone nuts?” Merriweather asked.

Stone said nothing. His mind was blank. Numb. He felt tired. He sat down on the curb and rested, getting his breath. The others stood around him.

“My ankle,” Leon said. He leaned against a stop sign, lips twisting with pain. “Hurts like hell.”

“Captain,” Barton said. “What’s the matter with them?”

“I don’t know,” Stone said. He felt in his ragged pocket for a cigarette. Across the street was a deserted cafe. The people had run out of it. Food was still on the counter. A hamburger was scorching on the skillet, coffee was boiling in a glass pot on the burner.

On the sidewalk lay groceries spilling out from bags dropped by terrorized shoppers. The motor of a deserted parked car purred to itself.

“Well?” Leon said. “What’ll we do?”

“I don’t know.”

“We can’t just —”

“I don’t know!” Stone got to his feet. He walked over and entered the cafe. They watched him sit down at the counter.

“What’s he doing?” Vecchi asked.

“I don’t know.” Parkhurst followed Stone into the cafe. “What are you doing?”

“I’m waiting to be served.”

Parkhurst plucked awkwardly at Stone’s shoulder. “Come on, Captain. There’s nobody here. They all left.”

Stone said nothing. He sat at the counter, his face vacant. Waiting passively to be served.

Parkhurst went back out. “What the hell has happened?” he asked Barton. “What’s wrong with them all?”

A spotted dog came nosing around. It passed them, stiff and alert, sniffing suspiciously. It trotted off down a side street. “Faces,” Barton said. “Faces?”

“They’re watching us. Up there.” Barton gestured toward a building. “Hiding. *Why?* Why are they hiding from us?”

Suddenly Merriweather stiffened. “Something’s coming.” They turned eagerly.

Down the street two black sedans turned the corner, headed toward them. “Thank God,” Leon muttered. He leaned against the wall of a building. “Here they are.”

The two sedans pulled to a stop at the curb. The doors opened. Men spilled out, surrounded them silently. Well-dressed. Ties and hats and long gray coats.

“I’m Scanlan,” one said. “FBI.” An older man with iron-gray hair. His voice was clipped and frigid. He studied the five of them intently. “Where’s the other?”

“Captain Stone? In there.” Barton pointed to the cafe.

“Get him out here.”

Barton went into the cafe. “Captain, they’re outside. Come on.”

Stone came along with him, back to the curb. “Who are they, Barton?” he asked haltingly.

“Six,” Scanlan said, nodding. He waved to his men. “Okay. This is all.” The FBI men moved in, crowding them back toward the brick front of the cafe.

“Wait!” Barton cried thickly. His head spun. “What — what’s happening?

“What is it?” Parkhurst demanded deprecatorily. Tears rolled down his face, streaking his cheeks. “Will you tell us, for God’s sake —”

The FBI men had weapons. They got them out. Vecchi backed away, his hands up. “Please!” he wailed. “What have we done? What’s happening?”

Sudden hope flickered in Leon’s breast. “They don’t know who we are. They think we’re Commies.” He addressed Scanlan. “We’re the Earth-Mars Expedition. My name is Leon. Remember? A year ago last October. We’re *back.* We’re back from Mars.” His voice trailed off. The weapons were coming up. Nozzles — hoses and tanks.

“We’re back!” Merriweather croaked. “We’re the Earth-Mars Expedition, comeback!”

Scanlan’s face was expressionless. “That sounds fine,” he said coldly. “Only, the ship crashed and blew up when it reached Mars. None of the

crew survived. We know because we sent up a robot scavenger team and brought back the corpses — six of them."

The FBI men fired. Blazing napalm sprayed toward the six bearded figures. They retreated, and then the flames touched them. The FBI men saw the figures ignite, and then the sight was cut off. They could no longer see the six figures thrashing about, but they could hear them. It was not something they enjoyed hearing, but they remained, waiting and watching.

Scanlan kicked at the charred fragments with his foot. "Not easy to be sure," he said. "Possibly only five here … but I didn't see any of them get away. They didn't have time." At the pressure of his foot, a section of ash broke away; it fell into particles that still steamed and bubbled.

His companion Wilks stared down. New at this, he could not quite believe what he had seen the napalm do. "I —" he said. "Maybe I'll go back to the car," he muttered, starting off away from Scanlan.

"It's not over positively," Scanlan said, and then he saw the younger man's face. "Yes," he said, "you go sit down."

People were beginning to filter out onto the sidewalks. Peeping anxiously from doorways and windows. "They got 'em!" a boy shouted excitedly. "They got the outer space spies!"

Cameramen snapped pictures. Curious people appeared on all sides, faces pale, eyes popping. Gaping down in wonder at the indiscriminate mass of charred ash.

His hands shaking, Wilks crept back into the car and shut the door after him. The radio buzzed, and he turned it off, not wanting to hear anything from it or say anything to it. At the doorway of the cafe, the gray-coated Bureau men remained, conferring with Scanlan. Presently a number of them started off at a trot, around the side of the cafe and up the alley. Wilks watched them go. What a nightmare, he thought.

Coming over, Scanlan leaned down and put his head into the car. “Feel better?”

“Some.” Presently he asked, “What’s this — the twenty-second time?” Scanlan said, “Twenty-first. Every couple of months … the same names, same men. I won’t tell you that you’ll get used to it. But at least it won’t surprise you.”

“I don’t see any difference between them and us,” Wilks said, speaking distinctly. “It was like burning up six human beings.”

“No,” Scanlan said. He opened the car door and got into the back seat, behind Wilks. “They only looked like six human beings. That’s the whole point. They want to. They intend to. You know that Barton, Stone, and Leon —”

“I know,” he said. “Somebody or something that lives somewhere out there saw their ship go down, saw them die, and investigated. Before we got there. And got enough to go on, enough to give them what they needed. But — ” He gestured. “Isn’t there anything else we can do with them?”

Scanlan said, “We don’t know enough about them. Only this — sending in of imitations, again and again. Trying to sneak them past us.” His face became rigid, despairing. “Are they crazy? Maybe they’re so different no contact’s possible. Do they think we’re all named Leon and Merriweather and Parkhurst and Stone? That’s the part that personally gets me down… Or maybe that’s our chance, the fact that they don’t understand we’re individuals. Figure how much worse if sometime they made up a — whatever it is… a spore… a seed. But not like one of those poor miserable six who died on Mars — something we wouldn’t know was an imitation…”

“They have to have a model,” Wilks said.

One of the Bureau men waved, and Scanlan scrambled out of the car. He came back in a moment to Wilks. “They say there’re only five,” he said. “One got away; they think they saw him. He’s crippled and not moving fast.

The rest of us are going after him — you stay here, keep your eyes open." He strode off up the alley with the other Bureau men.

Wilks lit a cigarette and sat with his head resting on his arm. Mimicry… everybody terrified. But —

Had anybody really tried to make contact?

Two policemen appeared, herding people back out of the way. A third black Dodge, loaded with Bureau men, moved along at the curb, stopped, and the men got out.

One of the Bureau men, whom he did not recognize, approached the car.

"Don't you have your radio on?"

"No," Wilks said. He snapped it back on.

"If you see one, do you know how to kill it?"

"Yes," he said.

The Bureau man went on to join his group.

If it was up to me, Wilks asked himself, what would I do? Try to find out what they want? Anything that looks so human, behaves in such a human way, *must feel* human … and if they — whatever they are — feel human, might they not become human, in time?

At the edge of the crowd of people, an individual shape detached itself and moved toward him. Uncertainly, the shape halted, shook its head, staggered and caught itself, and then assumed a stance like that of the people near it. Wilks recognized it because he had been trained to, over a period of months. It had gotten different clothes, a pair of slacks, a shirt, but it had buttoned the shirt wrong, and one of its feet was bare. Evidently it did

not understand the shoes. Or, he thought, maybe it was too dazed and injured.

As it approached him, Wilks raised his pistol and took aim at its stomach. They had been taught to fire there; he had fired, on the practice range, at chart after chart. Right in the midsection … bisect it, like a bug.

On its face the expression of suffering and bewilderment deepened as it saw him prepare to fire. It halted, facing him, making no move to escape. Now Wilks realized that it had been severely burned; probably it would not survive in any case.

“I have to,” he said.

It stared at him, and then it opened its mouth and started to say something.

He fired.

Before it could speak, it had died. Wilks got out as it pitched over and lay beside the car.

I did wrong, he thought to himself as he stood looking down at it. I shot it because I was afraid. But I had to. Even if it was wrong. It came here to infiltrate us, imitating us so we won’t recognize it. That’s what we’re told — we have to believe that they are plotting against us, are inhuman, and will never be more than that.

Thank God, he thought. It’s over.

And then he remembered it wasn’t…

It was a warm summer day, late in July.

The ship landed with a roar, dug across a plowed field, tore through a fence, a shed, and came finally to rest in a gully.

Silence.

Parkhurst got shakily to his feet. He caught hold of the safety rail. His shoulder hurt. He shook his head, dazed.

“We’re down,” he said. His voice rose with awe and excitement. “We’re down!”

“Help me up,” Captain Stone gasped. Barton gave him a hand.

Leon sat wiping a trickle of blood from his neck. The interior of the ship was a shambles. Most of the equipment was smashed and strewn about.

Vecchi made his way unsteadily to the hatch. With trembling fingers, he began to unscrew the heavy bolts.

“Well,” Barton said, “we’re back.”

“I can hardly believe it,” Merriweather murmured. The hatch came loose and they swung it quickly aside. “It doesn’t seem possible. Good old Earth.”

“Hey, listen,” Leon gasped, as he clambered down to the ground. “Somebody get the camera.”

“That’s ridiculous,” Barton said, laughing.

“Get it!” Stone yelled.

“Yes, get it,” Merriweather said. “Like we planned, if we ever got back. A historic record, for the schoolbooks.”

Vecchi rummaged around among the debris. “It’s sort of banged up,” he said. He held up the dented camera.

“Maybe it’ll work anyhow,” Parkhurst said, panting with exertion as he followed Leon outside. “How’re we going to take all six of us? Somebody has to snap the shutter.”

“I’ll set it for time,” Stone said, taking the camera and adjusting the knobs. “Everybody line up.” He pushed a button, and joined the others.

The six bearded, tattered men stood by their smashed ship, as the camera ticked. They gazed across the green countryside, awed and suddenly silent. They glanced at each other, eyes bright.

“We’re back!” Stone shouted. “We’re back!”

War Game

In his office at the Terran Import Bureau of Standards, the tall man gathered up the morning's memos from their wire basket, and, seating himself at his desk, arranged them for reading. He put on his iris lenses, lit a cigarette.

"Good morning," the first memo said in its tinny, chattery voice, as Wiseman ran his thumb along the line of pasted tape. Staring off through the open window at the parking lot, he listened to it idly. "Say, look, what's wrong with you people down there? We sent that lot of" — a pause as the speaker, the sales manager of a chain of New York department stores, found his records — "those Ganymedean toys. You realize we have to get them approved in time for the autumn buying plan, so we can get them stocked for Christmas." Grumbling, the sales manager concluded, "War games are going to be an important item again this year. We intend to buy big."

Wiseman ran his thumb down to the speaker's name and title.

"Joe Hauck," the memo-voice chattered. "Appeley's Children's."

To himself, Wiseman said, "Ah." He put down the memo, got a blank and prepared to replay. And then he said, half-aloud, "Yes, what about that lot of Ganymedean toys?"

It seemed like a long time that the testing labs had been on them. At least two weeks.

Of course, any Ganymedean products got special attention these days; the Moons had, during the last year, gotten beyond their usual state of economic greed and had begun — according to intelligence circles — mulling overt military action against competitive interest, of which the Inner Three planets could be called the foremost element. But so far nothing

had shown up. Exports remained of adequate quality, with no special jokers, no toxic paint to be licked off, no capsules of bacteria.

And yet….

Any group of people as inventive as the Ganymedeans could be expected to show creativity in whatever field they entered. Subversion would be tackled like any other venture — with imagination and a flair for wit.

Wiseman got to his feet and left his office, in the direction of the separate building in which the testing labs operated.

Surrounded by half-disassembled consumers' products, Pinario looked up to see his boss, Leon Wiseman, shutting the final door of the lab.

"I'm glad you came down," Pinario said, although actually he was stalling; he knew that he was at least five days behind in his work, and this session was going to mean trouble. "Better put on a prophylaxis suit — don't want to take risks." He spoke pleasantly, but Wiseman's expression remained dour.

"I'm here about those inner-citadel-storming shock troops at six dollars a set," Wiseman said, strolling among the stacks of many-sized unopened products waiting to be tested and released.

"Oh, that set of Ganymedean toy soldiers," Pinario said with relief. His conscience was clear on that item; every tester in the labs knew the special instructions handed down by the Cheyenne Government on the Dangers of Contamination from Culture Particles Hostile to Innocent Urban Populations, a typically muddy ukase from officialdom. He could always — legitimately — fall back and cite the number of that directive. "I've got them off by themselves," he said, walking over to accompany Wiseman, "due to the special danger involved."

“Let’s have a look,” Wiseman said. “Do you believe there’s anything in this caution, or is it more paranoia about ‘alien milieux’?”

Pinario said, “It’s justified, especially where children’s artifacts are concerned.”

A few hand-signals, and a slab of wall exposed a side room.

Propped up in the center was a sight that caused Wiseman to halt. A plastic life-size dummy of a child, perhaps five years in appearance, wearing ordinary clothes, sat surrounded by toys. At this moment, the dummy was saying, “I’m tired of that. Do something else.” It paused a short time, and then repeated, “I’m tired of that. Do something else.”

The toys on the floor, triggered to respond to oral instructions, gave up their various occupations, and started afresh.

“It saves on labor costs,” Pinario explained. “This is a crop of junk that’s got an entire repertoire to go through, before the buyer has his money’s worth. If we stuck around to keep them active, we’d be in here all the time.”

Directly before the dummy was the group of Ganymedean soldiers, plus the citadel which they had been built to storm. They had been sneaking up on it in an elaborate pattern, but, at the dummy’s utterance, they had halted. Now they were regrouping.

“You’re getting this all on tape?” Wiseman asked.

“Oh, yes,” Pinario said.

The model soldiers stood approximately six inches high, made from the almost indestructible thermoplastic compounds that the Ganymedean manufacturers were famous for. Their uniforms were synthetic, a

hodgepodge of various military costumes from the Moons and nearby planets. The citadel itself, a block of ominous dark metal-like stuff, resembled a legendary fort; peepholes dotted its upper surfaces, a drawbridge had been drawn up out of sight, and from the top turret a gaudy flag waved.

With a whistling pop, the citadel fired a projectile at its attackers. The projectile exploded in a cloud of harmless smoke and noise, among a cluster of soldiers.

"It fights back," Wiseman observed.

"But ultimately it loses," Pinario said. "It has to. Psychologically speaking, it symbolizes the external reality. The dozen soldiers, of course, represent to the child his own efforts to cope. By participating in the storming of the citadel, the child undergoes a sense of adequacy in dealing with the harsh world. Eventually he prevails, but only after a painstaking period of effort and patience." He added, "Anyhow, that's what the instruction booklet says." He handed Wiseman the booklet.

Glancing over the booklet, Wiseman asked, "And their pattern of assault varies each time?"

"We've had it running for eight days now. The same pattern hasn't cropped up twice. Well, you've got quite a few units involved."

The soldiers were sneaking around, gradually nearing the citadel. On the walls, a number of monitoring devices appeared and began tracking the soldiers. Utilizing other toys being tested, the soldiers concealed themselves.

"They can incorporate accidental configurations of terrain," Pinario explained. "They're object-tropic; when they see, for example, a dollhouse here for testing, they climb into it like mice. They'll be all through it." To prove his point, he picked up a large toy spaceship manufactured by a Uranian company; shaking it, he spilled two soldiers from it.

“How many times do they take the citadel,” Wiseman asked, “on a percentage basis?”

“So far, they’ve been successful one out of nine tries. There’s an adjustment in the back of the citadel. You can set it for a higher yield of successful tries.”

He threaded a path through the advancing soldiers; Wiseman accompanied him, and they bent down to inspect the citadel.

“This is actually the power supply,” Pinario said. “Cunning. Also, the instructions to the soldiers emanate from it. High-frequency transmission, from a shot-box.”

Opening the back of the citadel, he showed his boss the container of shot.

Each shot was an instruction iota. For an assault pattern, the shot were tossed up, vibrated, allowed to settle in a new sequence. Randomness was thereby achieved. But since there was a finite number of shot, there had to be a finite number of patterns.

“We’re trying them all,” Pinario said.

“And there’s no way to speed it up?”

“It’ll just have to take time. It may run through a thousand patterns and then —”

“The next one,” Wiseman finished, “may have them make a ninety-degree turn and start firing at the nearest human being.”

Pinario said somberly, “Or worse. There’re a good deal of ergs in that power pack. It’s made to put out for five years. But if it all went into something simultaneously —”

“Keep testing,” Wiseman said.

They looked at each other and then at the citadel. The soldiers had by now almost reached it. Suddenly one wall of the citadel flapped down, a gun-muzzle appeared, and the soldiers had been flattened.

“I never saw that before,” Pinario murmured.

For a moment nothing stirred. And then the lab’s child-dummy, seated among its toys, said, “I’m tired of that. Do something else.”

With a tremor of uneasiness, the two men watched the soldiers pick themselves up and regroup.

Two days later, Wiseman’s superior, a heavyset, short, angry man with popping eyes, appeared in his office. “Listen,” Fowler said, “you get those damn toys out of testing. I’ll give you until tomorrow.” He started back out, but Wiseman stopped him.

“This is too serious,” he said. “Come down to the lab and I’ll show you.”

Arguing all the way, Fowler accompanied him to the lab. “You have no concept of the capital some of these firms have invested in this stuff!” he was saying as they entered. “For every product you’ve got represented here, there’s a ship or a warehouse full on Luna, waiting for official clearance so it can come in!”

Pinario was nowhere in sight. So Wiseman used his key, by-passing the hand-signals that opened up the testing room.

There, surrounded by toys, sat the dummy that the lab men had built. Around it the numerous toys went through their cycles. The racket made Fowler wince.

“This is the item in particular,” Wiseman said, bending down by the citadel. A soldier was in the process of squirming on his belly toward it. “As you can see, there are a dozen soldiers. Given that many, and the energy available to them, plus the complex instruction data —”

Fowler interrupted, “I see only eleven.”

“One’s probably hiding,” Wiseman said.

From behind them, a voice said, “No, he’s right.” Pinario, a rigid expression on his face, appeared. “I’ve been having a search made. One is gone.”

The three men were silent.

“Maybe the citadel destroyed him,” Wiseman finally suggested.

Pinario said, “There’s a law of matter dealing with that. If it ‘destroyed’ him — *what did it do with the remains?”*

“Possibly converted him into energy,” Fowler said, examining the citadel and the remaining soldiers.

“We did something ingenious,” Pinario said, “when we realized that a soldier was gone. We weighed the remaining eleven plus the citadel. Their combined weight is exactly equal to that of the original set — the original dozen soldiers and the citadel. So he’s in there somewhere.” He pointed at the citadel, which at the moment was pinpointing the soldiers advancing toward it.

Studying the citadel, Wiseman had a deep intuitive feeling. It had changed. It was, in some manner, different.

“Run your tapes,” Wiseman said.

“What?” asked Pinario, and then he flushed. “Of course.” Going to the child-dummy, he shut it off, opened it, and removed the drum of video recording tape. Shakily, he carried it to the projector.

They sat watching the recording sequences flash by: one assault after another, until the three of them were bleary-eyed. The soldiers advanced, retreated, were fired on, picked themselves up, advanced again…

“Stop the transport,” Wiseman said suddenly.

The last sequence was re-run.

A soldier moved steadily toward the base of the citadel. A missile, fired at him, exploded and for a time obscured him. Meanwhile, the other eleven soldiers scurried in a wild attempt to mount the walls. The soldier emerged from the cloud of dust and continued. He reached the wall. A section slid back.

The soldier, blending with the dingy wall of the citadel, used the end of his rifle as a screwdriver to remove his head, then one arm, then both legs. The disassembled pieces were passed into the aperture of the citadel. When only the arm and rifle remained, that, too, crawled into the citadel, worming blindly, and vanished. The aperture slid out of existence.

After a long time, Fowler said in a hoarse voice, “The presumption by the parent would be that the child had lost or destroyed one of the soldiers. Gradually the set would dwindle — with the child getting the blame.”

Pinario said, “What do you recommend?”

“Keep it in action,” Fowler said, with a nod from Wiseman. “Let it work out its cycle. But don’t leave it alone.”

“I’ll have somebody in the room with it from now on,” Pinario agreed.

“Better yet, stay with it yourself,” Fowler said.

To himself, Wiseman thought: *Maybe we all better stay with it. At least two of us, Pinario and myself.*

I wonder what it did with the pieces, he thought.

What did it make?

By the end of the week, the citadel had absorbed four more of the soldiers.

Watching it through a monitor, Wiseman could see in it no visible change. Naturally. The growth would be strictly internal, down out of sight.

On and on the eternal assaults, the soldiers wriggling up, the citadel firing in defense. Meanwhile, he had before him a new series of Ganymedean products. More recent children’s toys to be inspected.

“Now what?” he asked himself.

The first was an apparently simple item: a cowboy costume from the ancient American West. At least, so it was described. But he paid only cursory attention to the brochure: the hell with what the Ganymedeans had to say about it.

Opening the box, he laid out the costume. The fabric had a gray, amorphous quality. *What a miserably bad job,* he thought. It only vaguely resembled a cowboy suit; the lines seemed unformed, hesitant. And the

material stretched out of shape as he handled it. He found that he had pulled an entire section of it into a pocket that hung down.

“I don’t get it,” he said to Pinario. “This won’t sell.”

“Put it on,” Pinario said. “You’ll see.”

With effort, Wiseman managed to squeeze himself into the suit. “Is it safe?” he asked.

“Yes,” Pinario said. “I had it on earlier. This is a more benign idea. But it could be effective. To start it into action, you fantasize.”

“Along what lines?”

“Any lines.”

The suit made Wiseman think of cowboys, and so he imagined to himself that he was back at the ranch, trudging along the gravel road by the field in which black-faced sheep munched hay with that odd, rapid grinding motion of their lower jaws. He had stopped at the fence — barbed wire and occasional upright posts — and watched the sheep. Then, without warning, the sheep lined up and headed off, in the direction of a shaded hillside beyond his range of vision.

He saw trees, cypress growing against the skyline. A chicken hawk, far up, flapped its wings in a pumping action … *as if*, he thought, *it’s filling itself with more air, to rise higher.* The hawk glided energetically off, then sailed at a leisurely pace. Wiseman looked for a sign of its prey. Nothing but the dry mid-summer fields munched flat by the sheep. Frequent grasshoppers. And, on the road itself, a toad. The toad had burrowed into the loose dirt; only its top part was visible.

As he bent down, trying to get up enough courage to touch the warty top of the toad's head, a man's voice said nearby him, "How do you like it?"

"Fine," Wiseman said. He took a deep breath of the dry grass smell; he filled his lungs. "Hey, how do you tell a female toad from a male toad? By the spots, or what?"

"Why?" asked the man, standing behind him slightly out of sight.

"I've got a toad here."

"Just for the record," the man said, "can I ask you a couple of questions?"

"Sure," Wiseman said.

"How old are you?"

That was easy. "Ten years and four months," he said, with pride.

"Where exactly are you, at this moment?"

"Out in the country, Mr. Gaylord's ranch, where my dad takes me and my mother every weekend when we can."

"Turn around and look at me," the man said. "And tell me if you know me."

With reluctance, he turned from the half-buried toad to look. He saw an adult with a thin face and a long, somewhat irregular nose. "You're the man who delivers the butane gas," he said. "For the butane company." He glanced around, and sure enough, there was the truck, parked by the butane gate. "My dad says butane is expensive, but there's no other —"

The man broke in, “Just for the sake of curiosity, what’s the name of the butane company?”

“It’s right on the truck,” Wiseman said, reading the large painted letters. “Pinario Butane Distributors, Petaluma, California. You’re Mr. Pinario.”

“Would you be willing to swear that you’re ten years old, standing in a field near Petaluma, California?” Mr. Pinario asked.

“Sure.” He could see, beyond the field, a range of wooded hills. Now he wanted to investigate them; he was tired of standing around gabbing. “I’ll see you,” he said, starting off. “I have to go get some hiking done.”

He started running, away from Pinario, down the gravel road. Grasshoppers leaped away, ahead of him. Gasping, he ran faster and faster.

“Leon!” Mr. Pinario called after him. “You might as well give up! Stop running!”

“I’ve got business in those hills,” Wiseman panted, still jogging along. Suddenly something struck him full force; he sprawled on his hands, tried to get back up. In the dry midday air, something shimmered; he felt fear and pulled away from it. A shape formed, a flat wall…

“You won’t get to those hills,” Mr. Pinario said, from behind him. “Better stay in roughly one place. Otherwise you collide with things.”

Wiseman’s hands were damp with blood; he had cut himself falling. In bewilderment, he stared down at the blood… .

Pinario helped him out of the cowboy suit, saying, “It’s as unwholesome a toy as you could want. A short period with it on, and the child would be unable to face contemporary reality. Look at you.”

Standing with difficulty, Wiseman inspected the suit; Pinario had forcibly taken it from him.

“Not bad,” he said in a trembling voice. “It obviously stimulates the withdrawal tendencies already present. I know I’ve always had a latent retreat fantasy toward my childhood. That particular period, when we lived in the country.”

“Notice how you incorporated real elements into it,” Pinario said, “to keep the fantasy going as long as possible. If you’d had time, you would have figured a way of incorporating the lab wall into it, possibly as the side of a barn.”

Wiseman admitted, “I — already had started to see the old dairy building, where the farmers brought their market milk.”

“In time,” Pinario said, “it would have been next to impossible to get you out of it.”

To himself, Wiseman thought, *If it could do that to an adult, just imagine the effect on a child.*

“That other thing you have there,” Pinario said, “that game, it’s a screwball notion. You feel like looking at it now? It can wait.”

“I’m okay,” Wiseman said. He picked up the third item and began to open it.

“A lot like the old game of Monopoly,” Pinario said. “It’s called Syndrome.”

The game consisted of a board, plus play money, dice, pieces to represent the players. And stock certificates.

“You acquire stock,” Pinario said, “same as in all this kind, obviously.” He didn’t even bother to look at the instructions. “Let’s get Fowler down here and play a hand; it takes at least three.”

Shortly, they had the Division Director with them. The three men seated themselves at a table, the game of Syndrome in the center.

“Each player starts out equal with the others,” Pinario explained, “same as all this type, and during the play, their statuses change according to the worth of the stock they acquire in various economic syndromes.”

The syndromes were represented by small, bright plastic objects, much like the archaic hotels and houses of Monopoly.

They threw the dice, moved their counters along the board, bid for and acquired property, paid fines, collected fines, went to the “decontamination chamber” for a period. Meanwhile, behind them, the seven model soldiers crept up on the citadel again and again.

“I’m tired of that,” the child-dummy said. “Do something else.”

The soldiers regrouped. Once more they started out, getting nearer and nearer the citadel.

Restless and irritable, Wiseman said, “I wonder how long that damn thing has to go on before we find out what it’s for.”

“No telling.” Pinario eyed a purple-and-gold share of stock that Fowler had acquired. “I can use that,” he said. “That’s a heavy uranium mine stock on Pluto. What do you want for it?”

“Valuable property,” Fowler murmured, consulting his other stocks. “I might make a trade, though.”

How can I concentrate on a game, Wiseman asked himself, *when that thing is getting closer and nearer to — God knows what? To whatever it was built to reach. Its critical mass,* he thought.

"Just a second," he said in a slow, careful voice. He put down his hand of stocks. "Could that citadel be a pile?"

"Pile of what?" Fowler asked, concerned with his hand.

Wiseman said loudly, "Forget this game."

"An interesting idea," Pinario said, also putting down his hand. "It's constructing itself into an atomic bomb, piece by piece. Adding until —" He broke off. "No, we thought of that. There're no heavy elements present in it. It's simply a five-year battery, plus a number of small machines controlled by instructions broadcast from the battery itself. You can't make an atomic pile out of that."

"In my opinion," Wiseman said, "we'd be safer getting it out of here." His experience with the cowboy suit had given him a great deal more respect for the Ganymedean artificers. And if the suit was the benign one …

Fowler, looking past his shoulder, said, "There are only six soldiers now." Both Wiseman and Pinario got up instantly. Fowler was right. Only half of the set of soldiers remained. One more had reached the citadel and been incorporated.

"Let's get a bomb expert from the Military Services in here," Wiseman said, "and let him check it. This is out of our department." He turned to his boss, Fowler. "Don't you agree?"

Fowler said, "Let's finish this game first."

"Why?"

“Because we want to be certain about it,” Fowler said. But his rapt interest showed that he had gotten emotionally involved and wanted to play to the end of the game. “What will you give me for this share of Pluto stock? I’m open to offers.”

He and Pinario negotiated a trade. The game continued for another hour. At last, all three of them could see that Fowler was gaining control of the various stocks. He had five mining syndromes, plus two plastics firms, an algae monopoly, and all seven of the retail trading syndromes. Due to his control of the stock, he had, as a byproduct, gotten most of the money.

“I’m out,” Pinario said. All he had left were minor shares which controlled nothing. “Anybody want to buy these?”

With his last remaining money, Wiseman bid for the shares. He got them and resumed playing, this time against Fowler alone.

“It’s clear that this game is a replica of typical interculture economic ventures,” Wiseman said. “The retail trading syndromes are obviously Ganymedean holdings.”

A flicker of excitement stirred in him; he had gotten a couple of good throws with the dice and was in a position to add a share to his meager holdings. “Children playing this would acquire a healthy attitude toward economic realities. It would prepare them for the adult world.”

But a few minutes later, he landed on an enormous tract of Fowler holdings, and the fine wiped out his resources. He had to give up two shares of stock; the end was in sight.

Pinario, watching the soldiers advance toward the citadel, said, “You know, Leon, I’m inclined to agree with you. This thing may be one terminal of a bomb. A receiving station of some kind. When it’s completely wired up, it might bring in a surge of power transmitted from Ganymede.”

“Is such a thing possible?” Fowler asked, stacking his play money into different denominations

“Who knows what they can do?” Pinario said, wandering around with his hands in his pockets. “Are you almost finished playing?”

“Just about,” Wiseman said.

“The reason I say that,” Pinario said, “is that now there’re only five soldiers. It’s speeding up. It took a week for the first one, and only an hour for the seventh. I wouldn’t be surprised if the rest go within the next two hours, all five of them.”

“We’re finished,” Fowler said. He had acquired the last share of stock and the last dollar.

Wiseman arose from the table, leaving Fowler. “I’ll call Military Services to check the citadel. About this game, though, it’s nothing but a steal from our Terran game Monopoly.”

“Possibly they don’t realize that we have the game already,” Fowler said, “under another name.”

A stamp of admissibility was placed on the game of Syndrome and the importer was informed. In his office, Wiseman called Military Services and told them what he wanted.

“A bomb expert will be right over,” the unhurried voice at the other end of the line said. “Probably you should leave the object alone until he arrives.”

Feeling somewhat useless, Wiseman thanked the clerk and hung up. They had failed to dope out the soldiers-and-citadel war game; now it was out of their hands.

The bomb expert was a young man, with closecropped hair, who smiled friendlily at them as he set down his equipment. He wore ordinary coveralls, with no protective devices.

“My first advice,” he said, after he had looked the citadel over, “is to disconnect the leads from the battery. Or, if you want, we can let the cycle finish out, and then disconnect the leads before any reaction takes place. In other words, allow the last mobile elements to enter the citadel. Then, as soon as they’re inside, we disconnect the leads and open her up and see what’s been taking place.”

“Is it safe?” Wiseman asked.

“I think so,” the bomb expert said. “I don’t detect any sign of radioactivity in it.” He seated himself on the floor, by the rear of the citadel, with a pair of cutting pliers in his hand.

Now only three soldiers remained. “It shouldn’t be long,” the young man said cheerfully. Fifteen minutes later, one of the three soldiers crept up to the base of the citadel, removed his head, arm, legs, body, and disappeared piecemeal into the opening provided for him. “That leaves two,” Fowler said.

Ten minutes later, one of the two remaining soldiers followed the one ahead of him.

The four men looked at each other. “This is almost it,” Pinario said huskily.

The last remaining soldier wove his way toward the citadel. Guns within the citadel fired at him, but he continued to make progress.

“Statistically speaking,” Wiseman said aloud, to break some of the tension, “it should take longer each time, because there are fewer men for it

to concentrate on. It should have started out fast, then got more infrequent until finally this last soldier should put in at least a month trying to —”

“Pipe down,” the young bomb expert said in a quiet, reasonable voice. “If you don’t mind.”

The last of the twelve soldiers reached the base of the citadel. Like those before him, he began to dissemble himself.

“Get those pliers ready,” Pinario grated.

The parts of the soldier traveled into the citadel. The opening began to close. From within, a humming became audible, a rising pitch of activity.

“Now, for God’s sake!” Fowler cried.

The young bomb expert reached down his pliers and cut into the positive lead of the battery. A spark flashed from the pliers and the young bomb expert jumped reflexively; the pliers flew from his hands and skidded across the floor. “Jeez!” he said. “I must have been grounded.” Groggily, he groped about for the pliers.

“You were touching the frame of the thing,” Pinario said excitedly. He grabbed the pliers himself and crouched down, fumbling for the lead. “Maybe if I wrap a handkerchief around it,” he muttered, withdrawing the pliers and fishing in his pocket for a handkerchief. “Anybody got anything I can wrap around this? I don’t want to get knocked flat. No telling how many —”

“Give it to me,” Wiseman demanded, snatching the pliers from him. He shoved Pinario aside and closed the jaws of the pliers about the lead.

Fowler said calmly, “Too late.”

Wiseman hardly heard his superior's voice; he heard the constant tone within his head, and he put up his hands to his ears, futilely trying to shut it out. Now it seemed to pass directly from the citadel through his skull, transmitted by the bone. *We stalled around too long,* he thought. *Now it has us. It won out because there are too many of us; we got to squabbling…*

Within his mind, a voice said, "Congratulations. By your fortitude, you have been successful."

A vast feeling pervaded him then, a sense of accomplishment.

"The odds against you were tremendous," the voice inside his mind continued. "Anyone else would have failed."

He knew then that everything was all right. They had been wrong.

"What you have done here," the voice declared, "you can continue to do all your life. You can always triumph over adversaries. By patience and persistence, you can win out. The universe isn't such an overwhelming place, after all…"

No, he realized with irony, it wasn't.

"They are just ordinary persons," the voice soothed. "So even though you're the only one, an individual against many, you have nothing to fear. Give it time — and don't worry."

"I won't," he said aloud.

The humming receded. The voice was gone.

After a long pause, Fowler said, "It's over."

"I don't get it," Pinario said.

“That was what it was supposed to do,” Wiseman said. “It’s a therapeutic toy. Helps give the child confidence. The disassembling of the soldiers” — he grinned — “ends the separation between him and the world. He becomes one with it. And, in doing so, conquers it.”

“Then it’s harmless,” Fowler said.

“All this work for nothing,” Pinario groused. To the bomb expert, he said, “I’m sorry we got you up here for nothing.”

The citadel had now opened its gates wide. Twelve soldiers, once more intact, issued forth. The cycle was complete; the assault could begin again.

Suddenly Wiseman said, “I’m not going to release it.”

“What?” Pinario said. “Why not?”

“I don’t trust it,” Wiseman said. “It’s too complicated for what it actually does.”

“Explain,” Fowler demanded.

“There’s nothing to explain,” Wiseman said. “Here’s this immensely intricate gadget, and all it does is take itself apart and then reassemble itself. There *must* be more, even if we can’t —”

“It’s therapeutic,” Pinario put in.

Fowler said, “I’ll leave it up to you, Leon. If you have doubts, then don’t release it. We can’t be too careful.”

“Maybe I’m wrong,” Wiseman said, “but I keep thinking to myself: *What did they actually build this for?* I feel we still don’t know.”

“And the American Cowboy Suit,” Pinario added. “You don’t want to release that either.”

“Only the game,” Wiseman said. “Syndrome, or whatever it’s called.” Bending down, he watched the soldiers as they hustled toward the citadel. Bursts of smoke, again … activity, feigned attacks, careful withdrawals…

“What are you thinking?” Pinario asked, scrutinizing him.

“Maybe it’s a diversion,” Wiseman said. “To keep our minds involved. So we won’t notice something else.” That was his intuition, but he couldn’t pin it down. “A red herring,” he said. “While something else takes place. That’s why it’s so complicated. We were *supposed* to suspect it. That’s why they built it.”

Baffled, he put his foot down in front of a soldier. The soldier took refuge behind his shoe, hiding from the monitors of the citadel.

“There must be something right before our eyes,” Fowler said, “that we’re not noticing.”

“Yes.” Wiseman wondered if they would ever find it. “Anyhow,” he said, “we’re keeping it here, where we can observe it.”

Seating himself nearby, he prepared to watch the soldiers. He made himself comfortable for a long, long wait.

At six o’clock that evening, Joe Hauck, the sales manager for Appeley’s Children’s Store, parked his car before his house, got out, and strode up the stairs.

Under his arm he carried a large flat package, a “sample” that he had appropriated.

“Hey!” his two kids, Bobby and Lora, squealed as he let himself in. “You got something for us, Dad?” They crowded around him, blocking his path. In the kitchen, his wife looked up from the table and put down her magazine.

“A new game I picked for you,” Hauck said. He unwrapped the package, feeling genial. There was no reason why he shouldn’t help himself to one of the new games; he had been on the phone for weeks, getting the stuff through Import Standards — and after all was said and done, only one of the three items had been cleared.

As the kids went off with the game, his wife said in a low voice, “More corruption in high places.” She had always disapproved of his bringing home items from the store’s stock.

“We’ve got thousands of them,” Hauck said. “A warehouse full. Nobody’ll notice one missing.”

At the dinner table, during the meal, the kids scrupulously studied every word of the instructions that accompanied the game. They were aware of nothing else.

“Don’t read at the table,” Mrs. Hauck said reprovingly.

Leaning back in his chair, Joe Hauck continued his account of the day. “And after all that time, what did they release? One lousy item. We’ll be lucky if we can push enough to make a profit. It was that Shock Troop gimmick that would really have paid off. And that’s tied up indefinitely.”

He lit a cigarette and relaxed, feeling the peacefulness of his home, the presence of his wife and children.

His daughter said, “Dad, do you want to play? It says the more who play, the better.”

“Sure,” Joe Hauck said.

While his wife cleared the table, he and his children spread out the board, counters, dice and paper money and shares of stock. Almost at once he was deep in the game, totally involved; his childhood memories of game-playing swam back, and he acquired shares of stock with cunning and originality, until, toward the conclusion of the game, he had cornered most of the syndromes.

He settled back with a sigh of contentment. “That’s that,” he declared to his children. “Afraid I had a head start. After all, I’m not new to this type of game.” Getting hold of the valuable holdings on the board filled him with a powerful sense of satisfaction. “Sorry to have to win, kids.”

His daughter said, “You didn’t win.”

“You lost,” his son said.

“*What?*” Joe Hauck exclaimed.

“The person who winds up with the most stock *loses,*” Lora said.

She showed him the instructions. “See? The idea is to get rid of your stocks. Dad, you’re out of the game.”

“The heck with that,” Hauck said, disappointed. “That’s no kind of game.” His satisfaction vanished. “That’s no fun.”

“Now we two have to play out the game,” Bobby said, “to see who finally wins.”

As he got up from the board, Joe Hauck grumbled, “I don’t get it. What would anybody see in a game where the winner winds up with nothing at all?”

Behind him, his two children continued to play. As stock and money changed hands, the children became more and more animated. When the game entered its final stages, the children were in a state of ecstatic concentration.

“They don’t know Monopoly,” Hauck said to himself, “so this screwball game doesn’t seem strange to them.”

Anyhow, the important thing was that the kids enjoyed playing Syndrome; evidently it would sell, and that was what mattered. Already the two youngsters were learning the naturalness of surrendering their holdings. They gave up their stocks and money avidly, with a kind of trembling abandon.

Glancing up, her eyes bright, Lora said, “It’s the best educational toy you ever brought home, Dad!”

If There Were No Benny Cemoli

Scampering across the unplowed field the three boys shouted as they saw the ship: it had landed, all right, just where they expected, and they were the first to reach it.

"Hey, that's the biggest I ever saw!" Panting, the first boy halted. "That's not from Mars; that's from farther. It's from all the way out, I know it is." He became silent and afraid as he saw the size of it. And then looking up into the sky he realized that an armada had arrived, exactly as everyone had expected. "We better go tell," he said to his companions.

Back on the ridge, John LeConte stood by his steam-powered chauffeur-driven limousine, impatiently waiting for the boiler to warm. *Kids got there first*, he said to himself with anger. *Whereas I'm supposed to.* And the children were ragged; they were merely farm boys.

"Is the phone working today?" LeConte asked his secretary.

Glancing at his clipboard, Mr. Fall said, "Yes, sir. Shall I put through a message to Oklahoma City?" He was the skinniest employee ever assigned to LeConte's office. The man evidently took nothing for himself, was positively uninterested in food. And he was efficient.

LeConte murmured, "The immigration people ought to hear about this outrage."

He sighed. It had all gone wrong. The armada from Proxima Centauri had after ten years arrived and none of the early-warning devices had detected it in advance of its landing. Now Oklahoma City would have to deal with the outsiders here on home ground — a psychological disadvantage which LeConte felt keenly.

Look at the equipment they've got, he thought as he watched the commercial ships of the flotilla begin to lower their cargos. *Why, hell, they make us look like provincials.* He wished that his official car did not need twenty minutes to warm up; he wished —

Actually, he wished that CURB did not exist.

Centaurus Urban Renewal Bureau, a do-gooding body unfortunately vested with enormous intersystem authority. It had been informed of the Misadventure back in 2170 and had started into space like a phototropic organism, sensitive to the mere physical light created by the hydrogen-bomb explosions. But LeConte knew better than that. Actually the governing organizations in the Centaurian system knew many details of the tragedy because they had been in radio contact with other planets of the Sol system. Little of the native forms on Earth had survived. He himself was from Mars; he had headed a relief mission seven years ago, had decided to stay because there were so many opportunities here on Earth, conditions being what they were…

This is all very difficult, he said to himself as he stood waiting for his steam-powered car to warm. *We got here first, but CURB does outrank us; we must face that awkward fact. In my opinion, we've done a good job of rebuilding. Of course, it isn 't like it was before … but ten years is not long. Give us another twenty and we'll have the trains running again. And our recent road-building bonds sold quite successfully, in fact were oversubscribed.*

"Call for you, sir, from Oklahoma City," Mr. Fall said, holding out the receiver of the portable field-phone.

"Ultimate Representative in the Field John LeConte, here," LeConte said into it loudly. "Go ahead; I say go ahead."

"This is Party Headquarters," the dry official voice at the other end came faintly, mixed with static, in his ear. "We've received reports from dozens of alert citizens in Western Oklahoma and Texas of an immense —"

“It’s here,” LeConte said. “I can see it. I’m just about ready to go out and confer with its ranking members, and I’ll file a full report at the usual time. So it wasn’t necessary for you to check up on me.” He felt irritable.

“Is the armada heavily armed?”

“Naw,” LeConte said. “It appears to be comprised of bureaucrats and trade officials and commercial carriers. In other words, vultures.”

The Party desk-man said, “Well, go and make certain they understand that their presence here is resented by the native population as well as the Relief of War-torn Areas Administrating Council. Tell them that the legislature will be calling to pass a special bill expressing indignation at this intrusion into domestic matters by an intersystem body.”

“I know, I know,” LeConte said. “It’s all been decided; I know.”

His chauffeur called to him, “Sir, your car is ready now.”

The Party desk-man concluded, “Make certain they understand that you can’t negotiate with them; you have no power to admit them to Earth. Only the Council can do that and of course it’s adamantly against that.”

LeConte hung up the phone and hurried to his car.

Despite the opposition of the local authorities, Peter Hood of CURB decided to locate his headquarters in the ruins of the old Terran capital, New York City. This would lend prestige to the CURBmen as they gradually widened the circle of the organization’s influence. At last, of course, the circle would embrace the planet. But that would take decades.

As he walked through the ruins of what had once been a major train yard, Peter Hood thought to himself that when the task was done he himself would have long been retired. Not much remained of the pre-tragedy

culture here. The local authorities — the political nonentities who had flocked in from Mars and Venus, as the neighboring planets were called — had done little. And yet he admired their efforts.

To the members of his staff walking directly behind him he said, “You know, they have done the hard part for us. We ought to be grateful. It is not easy to come into a totally destroyed area, as they’ve done.”

His man Fletcher observed, “They got back a good return.”

Hood said, “Motive is not important. They have achieved results.” He was thinking of the official who had met them in his steam car; it had been solemn and formal, carrying complicated trappings. When these locals had first arrived on the scene years ago *they* had not been greeted, except perhaps by radiation-seared, blackened survivors who had stumbled out of cellars and gaped sightlessly. He shivered.

Coming up to him, a CURBman of minor rank saluted and said, “I think we’ve managed to locate an undamaged structure in which your staff could be housed for the time being. It’s underground.” He looked embarrassed. “Not what we had hoped for. We’d have to displace the locals to get anything attractive.”

“I don’t object,” Hood said. “A basement will do.”

“The structure,” the minor CURBman said, “was once a great homeostatic newspaper, the *New York Times.* It printed itself directly below us. At least, according to the maps. We haven’t located the newspaper yet; it was customary for the homeopapes to be buried a mile or so down. As yet we don’t know how much of this one survived.”

“But it would be valuable,” Hood agreed.

“Yes,” the CURBman said. “Its outlets are scattered all over the planet; it must have had a thousand different editions which it put out daily. How

many outlets function —" He broke off. "It's hard to believe that the local politicos made no efforts to repair any of the ten or eleven world-wide homeopapes, but that seems to be the case."

"Odd," Hood said. Surely it would have eased their task. The post-tragedy job of reuniting people into a common culture depended on newspapers, ionization in the atmosphere making radio and TV reception difficult if not impossible. "This makes me instantly suspicious," he said, turning to his staff. "Are they perhaps not trying to rebuild after all? Is their work merely a pretense?"

It was his own wife Joan who spoke up. "They may simply have lacked the ability to place the homeopapes on an operational basis."

Give them the benefit of the doubt, Hood thought. *You 're right.*

"So the last edition of the *Times"* Fletcher said, "was put on the lines the day the Misadventure occurred. And the entire network of newspaper communication and news-creation had been idle since. I can't respect these politicos; it shows they're ignorant of the basics of a culture. By reviving the homeopapes we can do more to reestablish the pre-tragedy culture than they've done in ten thousand pitiful projects." His tone was scornful.

Hood said, "You may misunderstand, but let it go. Let's hope that the cephalon of the pape is undamaged. We couldn't possibly replace it." Ahead he saw the yawning entrance which the CURBmen crews had cleared. This was to be his first move, here on the ruined planet, restoring this immense self-contained entity to its former authority. Once it had resumed its activity he would be freed for other tasks; the homeopape would take some of the burden from him.

A workman, still clearing debris away, muttered, "Jeez, I never saw so many layers of junk. You'd think they deliberately bottled it up down here." In his hands, the suction furnace which he operated glowed and pounded as it absorbed material, converting it to energy, leaving an increasingly enlarged opening.

“I’d like a report as soon as possible as to its condition,” Hood said to the team of engineers who stood waiting to descend into the opening. “How long it will take to revive it, how much —” He broke off.

Two men in black uniforms had arrived. Police, from the Security ship. One, he saw, was Otto Dietrich, the ranking investigator accompanying the armada from Centaurus, and he felt tense automatically; it was a reflex for all of them — he saw the engineers and the workmen cease momentarily and then, more slowly, resume their work.

“Yes,” he said to Dietrich. “Glad to see you. Let’s go off to this side room and talk there.” He knew beyond a doubt what the investigator wanted; he had been expecting him.

Dietrich said, “I won’t take up too much of your time, Hood. I know you’re quite busy. What is this, here?” He glanced about curiously, his scrubbed, round, alert face eager.

In a small side room, converted to a temporary office, Hood faced the two policemen. “I am opposed to prosecution,” he said quietly. “It’s been too long. Let them go.”

Dietrich, tugging thoughtfully at his ear, said, “But war crimes are war crimes, even four decades later. Anyhow, what argument can there be? We’re required by law to prosecute. *Somebody* started the war. They may well hold positions of responsibility now, but that hardly matters.”

“How many police troops have you landed?” Hood asked.

“Two hundred.”

“Then you’re ready to go to work.”

“We’re ready to make inquiries. Sequester pertinent documents and initiate litigation in the local courts. We’re prepared to enforce cooperation, if that’s what you mean. Various experienced personnel have been distributed to key points.” Dietrich eyed him. “All this is necessary; I don’t see the problem. Did you intend to protect the guilty parties — make use of their so-called abilities on your staff?”

“No,” Hood said evenly.

Dietrich said, “Nearly eighty million people died in the Misfortune. Can you forget that? Or is it that since they were merely local people, not known to us personally —”

“It’s not that,” Hood said. He knew it was hopeless; he could not communicate with the police mentality. “I’ve already stated my objections. I feel it serves no purpose at this late date to have trials and hangings. Don’t request use of my staff in this; I’ll refuse on the grounds that I can spare no one, not even a janitor. Do I make myself clear?”

“You idealists,” Dietrich sighed. “This is strictly a noble task confronting us … to rebuild, correct? What you don’t or won’t see is that these people will start it all over again, one day, unless we take steps now. We owe it to future generations. To be harsh now is the most humane method, in the long run. Tell me, Hood. What is this site? What are you resurrecting here with such vigor?”

“The *New York Times,”* Hood said.

“It has, I assume, a morgue? We can consult its backlog of information? That would prove valuable in building up our cases.”

Hood said, “I can’t deny you access to material we uncover.”

Smiling, Dietrich said, “A day by day account of the political events leading up to the war would prove quite interesting. Who, for instance, held

supreme power in the United States at the time of the Misfortune? No one we've talked to so far seems to remember." His smile increased.

Early the next morning the report from the corps of engineers reached Hood in his temporary office. The power supply of the newspaper had been totally destroyed. But the cephalon, the governing brain-structure which guided and oriented the homeostatic system, appeared to be intact. If a ship were brought close by, perhaps its power supply could be integrated into the newspaper's lines. Thereupon much more would be known.

"In other words," Fletcher said to Hood, as they sat with Joan eating breakfast, "it may come on and it may not. Very pragmatic. You hook it up and if it works you've done your job. What if it doesn't? Do the engineers intend to give up at that point?"

Examining his cup, Hood said, "This tastes like authentic coffee." He pondered. "Tell them to bring a ship in and start the homeopape up. And if it begins to print, bring me the edition at once." He sipped his coffee.

An hour later a ship of the line had landed in the vicinity and its power source had been tapped for insertion into the homeopape. The conduits were placed, the circuits cautiously closed.

Seated in his office, Peter Hood heard far underground a low rumble, a halting, uncertain stirring. They had been successful. The newspaper was returning to life.

The edition, when it was laid on his desk by a bustling CURBman, surprised him by its accuracy. Even in its dormant state, the newspaper had somehow managed not to fall behind events. Its receptors had kept going.

CURB LANDS, TRIP DECADE LONG,

PLANS CENTRAL ADMINISTRATION

Ten years after the Misfortune of a nuclear holocaust, the intersystem rehabilitation agency, CURB, has made its historic appearance on Earth's

surface, landing from a veritable armada of craft — a sight which witnesses described as “overpowering both in scope and in significance.” CURBman Peter Hood, named top coordinator by Centaurian authorities, immediately set up headquarters in the ruins of New York City and conferred with aides, declaring that he had come “not to punish the guilty but to reestablish the planetwide culture by every means available, and to restore —

It was uncanny, Hood thought as he read the lead article. The varied news-gathering services of the homeopape had reached into his own life, had digested and then inserted into the lead article even the discussion between himself and Otto Dietrich. The newspaper was — had been — doing its job. Nothing of news-interest escaped it, even a discreet conversation carried on with no outsiders as witnesses. He would have to be careful.

Sure enough, another item, ominous in tone, dealt with the arrival of the black jacks, the police.

SECURITY AGENCY VOWS “WAR CRIMINALS” TARGET

Captain Otto Dietrich, supreme police investigator arriving with the CURB armada from Proxima Centauri, said today that those responsible for the Misfortune of a decade ago “would have to pay for their crimes” before the bar of Centaurian justice. Two hundred black-uniformed police, it was learned by the *Times*, have already begun exploratory activities designed to —

The newspaper was warning Earth about Dietrich, and Hood could not help feeling grim relish. The *Times* had not been set up to serve merely the occupying hierarchy. It served everyone, including those Dietrich intended to try. Each step of the police activity would no doubt be reported in full detail. Dietrich, who liked to work in anonymity, would not enjoy this. But the authority to maintain the newspaper belonged to Hood.

And he did not intend to shut it off.

One item on the first page of the paper attracted his further notice; he read it, frowning and a little uneasy.

CEMOLI BACKERS RIOT IN UPSTATE NEW YORK

Supporters of Benny Cemoli, gathered in the familiar tent cities associated with the colorful political figure, clashed with local citizens armed with hammers, shovels, and boards, both sides claiming victory in the two-hour melee which left twenty injured and a dozen hospitalized in hastily-erected first aid stations. Cemoli, garbed as always in his toga-style red robes, visited the injured, evidently in good spirits, joking and telling his supporters that “it won’t be long now” an evident reference to the organization’s boast that it would march on New York City in the near future to establish what Cemoli deems “social justice and true equality for the first time in world history.” It should be recalled that prior to his imprisonment at San Quentin —

Flipping a switch on his intercom system, Hood said, “Fletcher, check into activities up in the north of the county. Find out about some sort of a political mob gathering there.”

Fletcher’s voice came back. “I have a copy of the *Times,* too, sir. I see the item about this Cemoli agitator. There’s a ship on the way up there right now; should have a report within ten minutes.” Fletcher paused. “Do you think — it’ll be necessary to bring in any of Dietrich’s people?”

“Let’s hope not,” Hood said shortly.

Half an hour later the CURB ship, through Fletcher, made its report.

Puzzled, Hood asked that it be repeated. But there was no mistake. The CURB field team had investigated thoroughly. They had found no sign whatsoever of any tent city or any group gathering. And citizens in the area whom they had interrogated had never heard of anyone named “Cemoli.” And there was no sign of any scuffle having taken place, no first aid stations, no injured persons. Only the peaceful, semi-rural countryside.

Baffled, Hood read the item in the *Times* once more. There it was, in black and white, on the front page, along with the news about the landing of

the CURB armada. What did it mean?

He did not like it at all.

Had it been a mistake to revive the great, old, damaged homeostatic newspaper?

From a sound sleep that night Hood was awakened by a clanging from far beneath the ground, an urgent racket that grew louder and louder as he sat up in bed, blinking and confused. Machinery roared. He heard the heavy rumbling movement as automatic circuits fitted into place, responding to instructions emanating from within the closed system itself.

“Sir,” Fletcher was saying from the darkness. A light came on as Fletcher located the temporary overhead fixture. “I thought I should come in and wake you. Sorry, Mr. Hood.”

“I’m awake,” Hood muttered, rising from the bed and putting on his robe and slippers. “What’s it doing?”

Fletcher said, “It’s printing an extra.”

Sitting up, smoothing her tousled blonde hair back, Joan said, “Good Lord. What about?” Wide-eyed, she looked from her husband to Fletcher.

“We’ll have to bring in the local authorities,” Hood said. “Confer with them.” He had an intuition as to the nature of the extra roaring through the presses at this moment. “Get that LeConte, the politico who met us on our arrival. Wake him up and fly him here immediately. We need him.”

It took almost an hour to obtain the presence of the haughty, ceremonious local potentate and his staff member. The two of them in their elaborate uniforms at last put in an appearance at Hood’s office, both of them indignant. They faced Hood silently, waiting to hear what he wanted.

In his bathrobe and slippers Hood sat at his desk, a copy of the *Times'* extra before him; he was reading it once more as LeConte and his man entered.

NEW YORK POLICE REPORT CEMOLI LEGIONS

ON MOVE TOWARD CITY,

BARRICADES ERECTED, NATIONAL GUARD ALERTED

He turned the paper, showing the headlines to the two Earthmen. "Who is this man?" he said.

After a moment LeConte said, "I — don't know."

Hood said, "Come on, Mr. LeConte."

"Let me read the article," LeConte said nervously. He scanned it in haste; his hands trembled as he held the newspaper. "Interesting," he said at last. "But I can't tell you a thing. It's news to me. You must understand that our communications have been sparse, since the Misfortune, and it's entirely possible that a political movement could spring up without our —"

"Please," Hood said. "Don't make yourself absurd."

Flushing, LeConte stammered, "I'm doing the best I can, summoned out of my bed in the middle of the night."

There was a stir, and through the office doorway came the rapidly-moving figure of Otto Dietrich, looking grim. "Hood," he said without preamble, "there's a *Times* kiosk near my headquarters. It just posted this." He held up a copy of the extra. "The damn thing is running this off and distributing it throughout the world, isn't it? However, we have crack teams up in that area and they report absolutely nothing, no road blocks, no militia-style troops on the move, no activity of any sort."

“I know,” Hood said. He felt weary. And still, from beneath them, the deep rumble continued, the newspaper printing its extra, informing the world of the march by Benny Cemoli’s supporters on New York City — a fantasy march, evidently, a product manufactured entirely within the cephalon of the newspaper itself. “Shut it off,” Dietrich said. Hood shook his head.

“No. I want to know more.”

“That’s no reason,” Dietrich said. “Obviously, it’s defective. Very seriously damaged, not working properly. You’ll have to search elsewhere for your world-wide propaganda network.” He tossed the newspaper down on Hood’s desk.

To LeConte, Hood said, “Was Benny Cemoli active before the war?” There was silence. Both LeConte and his assistant Mr. Fall were pale and tense; they faced him tight-lipped, glancing at each other.

“I am not much for police matters,” Hood said to Dietrich, “but I think you could reasonably step in here.”

Dietrich, understanding, said, “I agree. You two men are under arrest. Unless you feel inclined to talk a little more freely about this agitator in the red toga.” He nodded to two of his police, who stood by the office doorway; they stepped obediently forward.

As the two policemen came up to him, LeConte said, “Come to think of it, there was such a person. But — he was very obscure.”

“Before the war?” Hood asked.

“Yes.” LeConte nodded slowly. “He was a joke. As I recall, and it’s difficult… a fat, ignorant clown from some backwoods area. He had a little radio station or something over which he broadcast. He peddled some sort

of anti-radiation box which you installed in your house, and it made you safe from bomb-test fallout."

Now his staff member Mr. Fall said, "I remember. He even ran for the UN senate. But he was defeated, naturally."

"And that was the last of him?" Hood asked.

"Oh yes," LeConte said. "He died of Asian flu soon after. He's been dead for fifteen years."

In a helicopter, Hood flew slowly above the terrain depicted in the *Times* articles, seeing for himself that there was no sign of political activity. He did not feel really assured until he had seen with his own eyes that the newspaper had lost contact with actual events. The reality of the situation did not coincide with the *Times'* articles in any way; that was obvious. And yet — the homeostatic system continued on.

Joan, seated beside him, said, "I have the third article here, if you want to read it." She had been looking the latest edition over.

"No," Hood said.

"It says they're in the outskirts of the city," she said. "They broke through the police barricades and the governor has appealed for UN assistance."

Thoughtfully, Fletcher said, "Here's an idea. One of us, preferably you, Hood, should write a letter to the *Times."* Hood glanced at him.

"I think I can tell you exactly how it should be worded," Fletcher said. "Make it a simple inquiry. You've followed the accounts in the paper about Cemoli's movement. Tell the editor —" Fletcher paused. "That you feel sympathetic *and you'd like to join the movement.* Ask the paper how."

To himself, Hood thought, *In other words ask the newspaper to put me in touch with Cemoli.* He had to admire Fletcher's idea. It was brilliant, in a crazy sort of way. It was as if Fletcher had been able to match the derangement of the newspaper by a deliberate shift from common sense on his own part. He would participate in the newspaper's delusion. Assuming there was a Cemoli and a march on New York, he was asking a reasonable question.

Joan said, "I don't want to sound stupid, but how does one go about mailing a letter to a homeopape?"

"I've looked into that," Fletcher said. "At each kiosk set up by the paper there's a letter-slot, next to the coin-slot where you pay for your paper. It was the law when the homeopapes were set up originally, decades ago. All we need is your husband's signature." Reaching into his jacket, he brought out an envelope. "The letter's written."

Hood took the letter, examined it. *So we desire to be part of the mythical fat clown's throng,* he said to himself. "Won't there be a headline reading CURB CHIEF JOINS MARCH ON EARTH CAPITAL?" he asked Fletcher, feeling a trace of wry amusement. "Wouldn't a good, enterprising homeopape make front page use of a letter such as this?"

Obviously Fletcher had not thought of that; he looked chagrined. "I suppose we had better get someone else to sign it," he admitted. "Some minor person attached to your staff." He added, "I could sign it myself."

Handing him the letter back, Hood said, "Do so. It'll be interesting to see what response, if any, there is." *Letters to the editor,* he thought. *Letters to a vast, complex, electronic organism buried deep in the ground, responsible to no one, guided solely by its own ruling circuits. How would it react to this external ratification of its delusion? Would the newspaper be snapped back to reality?*

It was, he thought, *as if the newspaper, during these years of this enforced silence, had been dreaming, and now, reawakened, it had allowed*

portions of its former dreams to materialize in its pages along with its accurate, perceptive accounts of the actual situation. A blend of figments and sheer, stark reporting. Which ultimately would triumph? Soon, evidently, the unfolding story of Benny Cemoli would have the toga-wearing spellbinder in New York; it appeared that the march would succeed. And what then? How could this be squared with the arrival of CURB, with all its enormous intersystem authority and power? Surely the homeopape, before long, would have to face the incongruity.

One of the two accounts would have to cease … but Hood had an uneasy intuition that a homeopape which had dreamed for a decade would not readily give up its fantasies. *Perhaps,* he thought, *the news of us, of CURB and its task of rebuilding Earth, will fade from the pages of the* Times, *will be given a steadily decreasing coverage each day, farther back in the paper. And at last only the exploits of Benny Cemoli will remain.*

It was not a pleasant anticipation. It disturbed him deeply. *As if,* he thought, *we are only real so long as the* Times *writes about us; as if we were dependent for our existence on it.*

Twenty-four hours later, in its regular edition, the *Times* printed Fletcher's letter. In print it struck Hood as flimsy and contrived — surely the homeopape could not be taken in by it, and yet here it was. It had managed to pass each of the steps in the pape's processing.

Dear Editor:

Your coverage of the heroic march on the decadent plutocratic stronghold of New York City has fired my enthusiasm. How does an ordinary citizen become a part of this history in the making? Please inform me at once, as I am eager to join Cemoli and endure the rigors and triumphs with the others.

Cordially,

Rudolf Fletcher

Beneath the letter, the homeopape had given an answer; Hood read it rapidly.

Cemoli’s stalwarts maintain a recruiting office in downtown New York; address, 460 Bleekman St., New York 32. You might apply there, if the police haven’t cracked down on these quasi-legal activities, in view of the current crisis.

Touching a button on his desk, Hood opened the direct line to police headquarters. When he had the chief investigator, he said, “Dietrich, I’d like a team of your men; we have a trip to make and there may be difficulties.”

After a pause Dietrich said dryly, “So it’s not all noble reclamation after all. Well, we’ve already dispatched a man to keep an eye on the Bleekman Street address. I admire your letter scheme. It may have done the trick.” He chuckled.

Shortly, Hood and four black-uniformed Centaurian policemen flew by ‘copter above the ruins of New York City, searching for the remains of what had once been Bleekman Street. By the use of a map they managed after half an hour to locate themselves.

“There,” the police captain in charge of the team said, pointing. “That would be it, that building used as a grocery store.” The ‘copter began to lower. It was a grocery store, all right. Hood saw no signs of political activity, no persons loitering, no flags or banners. And yet — something ominous seemed to lie behind the commonplace scene below, the bins of vegetables parked out on the sidewalk, the shabby women in long cloth coats who stood picking over the winter potatoes, the elderly proprietor with his white cloth apron sweeping with his broom. It was too natural, too easy. It was *too* ordinary. “Shall we land?” the police captain asked him.

“Yes,” Hood said. “And be ready.”

The proprietor, seeing them land in the street before his grocery store, laid his broom carefully to one side and walked toward them. He was, Hood saw, a Greek. He had a heavy mustache and slightly wavy gray hair, and he gazed at them with innate caution, knowing at once that they did not intend him any good. Yet he had decided to greet them with civility; he was not afraid of them.

"Gentlemen," the Greek grocery store owner said, bowing slightly. "What can I do for you?" His eyes roved speculatively over the black Centaurian police uniforms, but he showed no expression, no reaction.

Hood said, "We've come to arrest a political agitator. You have nothing to be alarmed about." He started toward the grocery store; the team of police followed, their side arms drawn.

"Political agitation here?" the Greek said. "Come on. It is impossible."

He hurried after them, panting, alarmed now. "What have I done? Nothing at all; you can look around. Go ahead." He held open the door of the store, ushering them inside. "See right away for yourself."

"That's what we intend to do," Hood said. He moved with agility, wasting no time on conspicuous portions of the store; he strode directly on through.

The back room lay ahead, the warehouse with its cartons of cans, cardboard boxes stacked up on every side. A young boy was busy making a stock inventory; he glanced up, startled, as they entered. *Nothing here*, Hood thought. *The owner's son at work, that's all.* Lifting the lid of a carton Hood peered inside. Cans of peaches. And beside that a crate of lettuce. He tore off a leaf, feeling futile and — disappointed.

The police captain said to him in a low voice, "Nothing, sir."

"I see that," Hood said, irritably.

A door to the right led to a closet. Opening it, he saw brooms and a mop, a galvanized pail, boxes of detergents. And — There were drops of paint on the floor.

The closet, some time recently, had been repainted. When he bent down and scratched with his nail he found the paint still tacky. “Look at this,” he said, beckoning the police captain over. The Greek, nervously, said, “What’s the matter, gentlemen? You find something dirty and report to the board of health, is that it? Customers have complained — tell me the truth, please. Yes, it is fresh paint. We keep everything spick and span. Isn’t that in the public interest?”

Running his hands across the wall of the broom closet, the police captain said quietly, “Mr. Hood, there was a doorway here. Sealed up now, very recently.” He looked expectantly toward Hood, awaiting instructions. Hood said, “Let’s go in.”

Turning to his subordinates, the police captain gave a series of orders. From the ship, equipment was dragged, through the store, to the closet; a controlled whine arose as the police began the task of cutting into the wood and plaster.

Pale, the Greek said, “This is outrageous. I will sue.”

“Right,” Hood agreed. “Take us to court.” Already a portion of the wall had given way. It fell inward with a crash, and bits of rubble spilled down onto the floor. A white cloud of dust rose, then settled.

It was not a large room which Hood saw in the glare of the police flashlights. Dusty, without windows, smelling stale and ancient… the room had not been inhabited for a long, long time, he realized, and he warily entered. It was empty. Just an abandoned storeroom of some kind, its wooden walls scaling and dingy. Perhaps before the Misfortune the grocery store had possessed a larger inventory. More stocks had been available then, but now this room was not needed. Hood moved about, flashing his beam of

light up to the ceiling and then down to the floor. Dead flies, entombed here … and, he saw, a few live ones which crept haltingly in the dust.

"Remember," the police captain said, "it was boarded up just now, within the last three days. Or at least the painting was just now done, to be absolutely accurate about it."

"These flies," Hood said. "They're not even dead yet." So it had not even been three days. Probably the boarding-up had been done yesterday.

What had this room been used for? He turned to the Greek, who had come after them, still tense and pale, his dark eyes flickering rapidly with concern. *This is a smart man*, Hood realized. *We will get little out of him.*

At the far end of the storeroom the police flashlights picked out a cabinet, empty shelves of bare, rough wood. Hood walked toward it.

"Okay," the Greek said thickly, swallowing. "I admit it. We have kept bootleg gin stored here. We became scared. You Centaurians —" He looked around at them with fear. "You're not like our local bosses; we know them, they understand us. You! You can't be reached. But we have to make a living." He spread his hands, appealing to them.

From behind the cabinet the edge of something protruded. Barely visible, it might never have been noticed. A paper which had fallen there, almost out of sight; it had slipped down farther and farther. Now Hood took hold of it and carefully drew it out. Back up the way it had come.

The Greek shuddered.

It was, Hood saw, a picture. A heavy, middle-aged man with loose jowls stained black by the grained beginnings of a beard, frowning, his lips set in defiance. A big man, wearing some kind of uniform. Once this picture had hung on the wall and people had come here and looked at it, paid respect to it. He knew who it was. This was Benny Cemoli, at the height of his

political career, the leader glaring bitterly at the followers who had gathered here. So this was the man.

No wonder the *Times* showed such alarm.

To the Greek grocery store owner, Hood said, holding up the picture, “Tell me. Is this familiar to you?”

“No, no,” the Greek said. He wiped perspiration from his face with a large red handkerchief. “Certainly not.” But obviously, it was.

Hood said, “You’re a follower of Cemoli, aren’t you?”

There was silence.

“Take him along,” Hood said to the police captain. “And let’s start back.” He walked from the room, carrying the picture with him.

As he spread the picture out on his desk, Hood thought, *It isn’t merely a fantasy of the* Times. *We know the truth now. The man is real and twenty-four hours ago this portrait of him hung on a wall, in plain sight. It would still be there this moment, if CURB had not put in its appearance. We frightened them. The Earth people have a lot to hide from us, and they know it. They are taking steps, rapidly and effectively, and we will be lucky if we can —*

Interrupting his thoughts, Joan said, “Then the Bleekman Street address really was a meeting place for them. The pape was correct.”

“Yes,” Hood said.

“Where is he now?”

I wish I knew, Hood thought.

“Has Dietrich seen the picture yet?”

“Not yet,” Hood said.

Joan said, “He was responsible for the war and Dietrich is going to find it out.”

“No one man,” Hood said, “could be solely responsible.”

“But he figured largely,” Joan said. “That’s why they’ve gone to so much effort to eradicate all traces of his existence.”

Hood nodded.

“Without the *Times”* she said, “would we ever have guessed that such a political figure as Benny Cemoli existed? We owe a lot to the pape. They overlooked it or weren’t able to get to it. Probably they were working in such haste; they couldn’t think of everything, even in ten years. It must be hard to obliterate *every* surviving detail of a planetwide political movement, especially when its leader managed to seize absolute power in the final phase.”

“Impossible to obliterate,” Hood said. *A closed-off storeroom in the back of a Greek grocery store… that was enough to tell us what we needed to know. Now Dietrich’s men can do the rest. If Cemoli is alive they will eventually find him, and if he’s dead — they’ll be hard to convince, knowing Dietrich. They’ll never stop looking now.*

“One good thing about this,” Joan said, “is that now a lot of innocent people will be off the hook. Dietrich won’t go around prosecuting them. He’ll be busy tracking down Cemoli.”

True, Hood thought. And that was important. The Centaurian police would be thoroughly occupied for a long time to come, and that was just as

well for everyone, including CURB and its ambitious program of reconstruction.

If there had never been a Benny Cemoli, he thought suddenly, *It would almost have been necessary to invent him.* An odd thought… he wondered how it happened to come to him. Again he examined the picture, trying to infer as much as possible about the man from this flat likeness. How had Cemoli sounded? Had he gained power through the spoken word, like so many demagogues before him? And his writing… Maybe some of it would turn up. Or even tape recordings of speeches he had made, the actual *sound of* the man. And perhaps video tapes as well. Eventually it would all come to light; it was only a question of time. *And then we will be able to experience for ourselves how it was to live under the shadow of such a man,* he realized.

The line from Dietrich's office buzzed. He picked up the phone. "We have the Greek here," Dietrich said. "Under drug-guidance he's made a number of admissions; you may be interested."

"Yes," Hood said.

Dietrich said, "He tells us he's been a follower for seventeen years, a real old-timer in the Movement. They met twice a week in the back of his grocery store, in the early days when the Movement was small and relatively powerless. That picture you have — I haven't seen it, of course, but Stavros, our Greek gentleman, told me about it — that portrait is actually obsolete in the sense that several more recent ones have been in vogue among the faithful for some time now. Stavros hung onto it for sentimental reasons. It reminded him of the old days. Later on when the Movement grew in strength, Cemoli stopped showing up at the grocery store, and the Greek lost out in any personal contact with him. He continued to be a loyal dues-paying member, but it became abstract for him."

"What about the war?" Hood asked.

“Shortly before the war Cemoli seized power in a coup here in North America, through a march on New York City, during a severe economic depression. Millions were unemployed and he drew a good deal of support from them. He tried to solve the economic problems through an aggressive foreign policy — attacked several Latin American republics which were in the sphere of influence of the Chinese. That seems to be it, but Stavros is a bit hazy about the big picture … we’ll have to fill in more from other enthusiasts as we go along. From some of the younger ones. After all, this one is over seventy years old.”

Hood said, “You’re not going to prosecute him, I hope.”

“Oh, no. He’s simply a source of information. When he’s told us all he has on his mind we’ll let him go back to his onions and canned apple sauce. He’s harmless.”

“Did Cemoli survive the war?”

“Yes,” Dietrich said. “But that was ten years ago. Stavros doesn’t know if the man is still alive now. Personally I think he is, and we’ll go on that assumption until it’s proved false. We have to.” Hood thanked him and hung up.

As he turned from the phone he heard, beneath him, the low, dull rumbling. The homeopape had once more started into life.

“It’s not a regular edition,” Joan said, quickly consulting her wristwatch. “So it must be another extra. This is exciting, having it happen like this; I can’t wait to read the front page.”

What has Benny Cemoli done now? Hood wondered. *According to the* Times, *in its misphased chronicling of the man’s epic… what stage, actually taking place years ago, has now been reached. Something climactic, deserving of an extra. It will be interesting, no doubt of that. The* Times *knows what is fit to print.* He, too, could hardly wait.

In downtown Oklahoma City, John LeConte put a coin into the slot of the kiosk which the *Times* had long ago established there. The copy of the *Times'* latest extra slid out, and he picked it up and read the headline briefly, spending only a moment on it to verify the essentials. Then he crossed the sidewalk and stepped once more into the rear seat of his chauffeur-driven steam car.

Mr. Fall said circumspectly, "Sir, here is the primary material, if you wish to make a word-by-word comparison." The secretary held out the folder, and LeConte accepted it.

The car started up. Without being told, the chauffeur drove in the direction of Party headquarters. LeConte leaned back, lit a cigar and made himself comfortable.

On his lap, the newspaper blazed up its enormous headlines.

CEMOLI ENTERS COALITION UN GOVERNMENT,

TEMPORARY CESSATION OF HOSTILITIES

To his secretary, LeConte said, "My phone, please."

"Yes sir." Mr. Fall handed him the portable field-phone. "But we're almost there. And it's always possible, if you don't mind my pointing it out, that they may have tapped us somewhere along the line."

"They're busy in New York," LeConte said. "Among the ruins." *In an area that hasn 't mattered as long as I can remember,* he said to himself. However, possibly Mr. Fall's advice was good; he decided to skip the phone call. "What do you think of this last item?" he asked his secretary, holding up the newspaper.

"Very success-deserving," Mr. Fall said, nodding.

Opening his briefcase, LeConte brought out a tattered, coverless textbook. It had been manufactured only an hour ago, and it was the next artifact to be planted for the invaders from Proxima Centaurus to discover. This was his own contribution, and he was personally quite proud of it. The book outlined in massive detail Cemoli's program of social change; the revolution depicted in language comprehensible to school children.

"May I ask," Mr. Fall said, "if the Party hierarchy intends for them to discover a corpse?"

"Eventually," LeConte said. "But that will be several months from now." Taking a pencil from his coat pocket he wrote in the tattered textbook, crudely, as if a pupil had done it:

DOWN WITH CEMOLI

Or was that going too far? No, he decided. There would be resistance. Certainly of the spontaneous, school boy variety. He added:

WHERE ARE THE ORANGES?

Peering over his shoulder, Mr. Fall said, "What does that mean?"

"Cemoli promises oranges to the youth," LeConte explained. "Another empty boast which the revolution never fulfills. That was Stavros's idea … he being a grocer. A nice touch." *Giving it*, he thought, *just that much more semblance of verisimilitude. It's the little touches that have done it.*

"Yesterday," Mr. Fall said, "when I was at Party headquarters, I heard an audio tape that had been made. Cemoli addressing the UN. It was uncanny; if you didn't know —"

"Who did they get to do it?" LeConte asked, wondering why he hadn't been in on it.

“Some nightclub entertainer here in Oklahoma City. Rather obscure, of course. I believe he specializes in all sorts of characterizations. The fellow gave it a bombastic, threatening quality … I must admit I enjoyed it.”

And meanwhile, LeConte thought, *there are no war-crimes trials. We who were leaders during the war, on Earth and on Mars, we who held responsible posts — we are safe, at least for a while. And perhaps it will be forever. If our strategy continues to work. And if our tunnel to the cephalon of the homeopape, which took us five years to complete, isn’t discovered. Or doesn’t collapse.*

The steam car parked in the reserved space before Party headquarters; the chauffeur came around to open the door and LeConte got leisurely out, stepping forth into the light of day, with no feeling of anxiety. He tossed his cigar into the gutter and then sauntered across the sidewalk, into the familiar building.

Novelty Act

Lights burned late in the great communal apartment building Abraham Lincoln, because this was All Souls night: the residents, all six hundred of them, were required by their charter to attend, down in the subsurface community hall. They filed in briskly, men, women and children; at the door Bruce Corley, operating their rather expensive new identification reader, checked each of them in turn to be sure that no one from outside, from another communal apartment building, got in. The residents submitted goodnaturedly, and it all went very fast.

"Hey Bruce, how much'd it set us back?" asked old Joe Purd, oldest resident in the building; he had moved in with his wife and two children the day the building, in May of 1980, had been built. His wife was dead now and the children had grown up, married and moved on, but Joe remained.

"Plenty," Bruce Corley said, "but it's error-proof; I mean, it isn't just subjective." Up to now, in his permanent job as sergeant of arms, he had admitted people merely by his ability to recognize them. But that way he had at last let in a pair of goons from Red Robin Hill Manor and they had disrupted the entire meeting with their questions and comments. It would not happen again.

Passing out copies of the agenda, Mrs. Wells smiled fixedly and chanted, "Item 3A, Appropriation for Roof Repairs, has been moved to 4A. Please make a note of that." The residents accepted their agendas and then divided into two streams flowing to opposite sides of the hall; the liberal faction of the building seated themselves on the right and the conservatives on the left, each conspicuously ignoring the existence of the other. A few uncommitted persons — newer residents or odd-balls — took seats in the rear, self-conscious and silent as the room buzzed with many small conferences. The tone, the mood of the room, was tolerant, but the residents knew that tonight there was going to be a clash. Presumably, both sides

were prepared. Here and there documents, petitions, newspaper clippings rustled as they were read and exchanged, handed back and forth.

On the platform, seated at the table with the four governing building trustees, chairman Donald Klugman felt sick at his stomach. A peaceful man, he shrank from these violent squabbles. Even seated in the audience he found it too much for him, and here tonight he would have to take active part; time and tide had rotated the chair around to him, as it did to each resident in turn, and of course it would be the night the school issue reached its climax.

The room had almost filled and now Patrick Doyle, the current building sky pilot, looking none too happy in his long white robe, raised his hands for silence. “The opening prayer,” he called huskily, cleared his throat and brought forth a small card. “Everyone please shut their eyes and bow their heads.” He glanced at Klugman and the trustees, and Klugman nodded for him to continue. “Heavenly Father,” Doyle said, “we the residents of the communal apartment building Abraham Lincoln beseech You to bless our assembly tonight. Um, we ask that in Your mercy You enable us to raise the funds for the roof repairs which seem imperative. We ask that our sick be healed and our unemployed find jobs and that in processing applicants wishing to live amongst us we show wisdom in whom we admit and whom we turn away. We further ask that no outsiders get in and disrupt our law-abiding, orderly lives and we ask in particularly that lastly, if it be Thy will, that Nicole Thibodeaux be free of her sinus headaches which have caused her not to appear before us on TV lately, and that those headaches not have anything to do with that time two years ago, which we all recall, when that stagehand allowed that weight to fall and strike her on the head, sending her to the hospital for several days. Anyhow, amen.”

The audience agreed, “Amen.”

Rising from his chair, Klugman said, “Now, before the business of the meeting, we’ll have a few minutes of our own talent displayed for our enjoyment. First, the three Fettersmoller girls from apartment number 205. They will do a soft-shoe dance to the tune of ‘I’ll Build a Stairway to the

Stars.’ ” He reseated himself, and onto the stage came the three little blonde-haired children, familiar to the audience from many talent shows in the past.

As the Fettersmoller girls in their striped pants and glittery silver jackets shuffled smilingly through their dance, the door to the outside hall opened and a latecomer, Edgar Stone, appeared.

He was late, this evening, because he had been grading test papers of his next-door neighbor, Mr. Ian Duncan, and as he stood in the doorway his mind was still on the test and the poor showing which Duncan — whom he barely knew — had made. It seemed to him that without even having finished the test he could see that Duncan had failed.

On the stage the Fettersmoller girls sang in their scratchy voices, and Stone wondered why he had come. Perhaps for no more reason than to avoid the fine, it being mandatory for the residents to be here, tonight. These amateur talent shows, put on so often, meant nothing to him; he recalled the old days when the TV set had carried entertainment, good shows put on by professionals. Now of course all the professionals who were any good were under contract to the White House, and the TV had become educational, not entertaining. Mr. Stone thought of great old late-late movies with comics such as Jack Lemmon and Shirley MacLaine, and then he looked once more at the Fettersmoller girls and groaned.

Corley, hearing him, glanced at him severely.

At least he had missed the prayer. He presented his identification to Corley’s new machine and it allowed him to pass down the aisle toward a vacant seat. Was Nicole watching this, tonight? Was a White House talent scout present somewhere in the audience? He saw no unfamiliar faces. The Fettersmoller girls were wasting their time. Seating himself, he closed his eyes and listened, unable to endure watching. They’ll never make it, he thought. They’ll have to face it, and so will their ambitious parents; they’re untalented, like the rest of us … Abraham Lincoln Apartments has added

little to the cultural store of the nation, despite its sweaty, strenuous determination, and you are not going to be able to change that.

The hopelessness of the Fettersmoller girls' position made him remember once more the test papers which Ian Duncan, trembling and waxen-faced, had pressed into his hands early that morning. If Duncan failed he would be even worse-off than the Fettersmoller girls because he would not even be living at Abraham Lincoln; he would drop out of sight — their sight, anyhow — and would revert to a despised and ancient status: he would find himself once more living in a dorm, working on a manual gang as they had all done back in their teens.

Of course he would also be refunded the money which he had paid for his apartment, a large sum which represented the man's sole major investment in life. From one standpoint, Stone envied him. What would I do, he asked himself as he sat eyes closed, if I had my equity back right now, in a lump sum? Perhaps, he thought, I'd emigrate. Buy one of those cheap, illegal jalopies they peddle at those lots which —

Clapping hands roused him. The girls had finished, and he, too, joined in the applause. On the platform, Klugman waved for silence. "Okay, folks, I know you enjoyed that, but there's lots *more* in store, tonight. And then there's the business part of the meeting; we mustn't forget that." He grinned at them.

Yes, Stone thought. The business. And he felt tense, because he was one of the radicals at Abraham Lincoln who wanted to abolish the building's grammar school and send their children to a public grammar school where they would be exposed to children from other buildings entirely. It was the kind of idea which met much opposition. And yet, in the last weeks, it had gained support. What a broadening experience it would be; their children would discover that people in other apartment buildings were no different from themselves. Barriers between people of all apartments would be torn down and a new understanding would come about.

At least, that was how it struck Stone, but the conservatives did not see it that way. Too soon, they said, for such mixing. There would be outbreaks of fights as the children clashed over which building was superior. In time it would happen … but not now, not so soon.

Risking the severe fine, Ian Duncan missed the assembly and remained in his apartment that evening, studying official Government texts on the religio-political history of the United States - *relpol*, as they were called. He was weak in this, he knew; he could barely comprehend the economic factors, let alone all the religious and political ideologies that had come and gone during the twentieth century, directly contributing to the present situation. For instance, the rise of the Democratic-Republican Party. Once it had been two parties, engaging in wasteful quarrels, in struggles for power, just the way buildings fought now. The two parties had merged, about 1985. Now there was just the one party, which had ruled a stable and peaceful society, and everyone belonged to it. Everyone paid dues and attended meetings and voted, each four years, for a new President — for the man they thought Nicole would like best.

It was nice to know that they, the people, had the power to decide who would become Nicole's husband, each four years; in a sense it gave to the electorate supreme power, even above Nicole herself. For instance, this last man, Taufic Negal. Relations between him and the First Lady were quite cool, indicating that she did not like this most recent choice very much. But of course being a lady she would never let on.

When did the position of First Lady first begin to assume stature greater than that of President? the *relpol* text inquired. In other words, when did our society become matriarchal, Ian Duncan said to himself. Around about 1990; I know the answer to that. There were glimmerings before that; the change came gradually. Each year the President became more obscure, the First Lady became better known, more liked, by the public. It was the public which brought it about. Was it a need for mother, wife, mistress, or perhaps all three? Anyhow they got what they wanted; they got Nicole and she is certainly all three and more besides.

In the corner of his living room the television set said *taaaaang*, indicating that it was about to come on. With a sigh, Ian Duncan closed the official U.S. Government text book and turned his attention to the screen. A special, dealing with activities at the White House, he speculated. One more tour, perhaps, or a thorough scrutiny (in massively-detailed depth) of a new hobby or pursuit of Nicole's. Has she taken up collecting bone-china cups? If so, we will have to view each and every Royal Albert blue.

Sure enough, the round, wattled features of Maxwell Jamison, the White House news secretary, appeared on the screen. Raising his hand, Jamison made his familiar gesture of greeting. "Evening, people of this land of ours," he said solemnly. "Have you ever wondered what it would be like to descend to the bottom of the Pacific Ocean? Nicole has, and to answer that question she has assembled in the Tulip Room of the White House three of the world's foremost oceanographers. Tonight she will ask them for their stories, and you will hear them, too, as they were taped live, just a short while ago through the facilities of the Unified Triadic Networks' Public Affairs Bureau."

And now to the White House, Ian Duncan said to himself. At least vicariously. We who can't find our way there, who have no talents which might interest the First Lady even for one evening: we get to see in anyhow, through the carefully-regulated window of our television set.

Tonight he did not really want to watch, but it seemed expedient to do so; there might be a surprise quiz on the program, at the end. And a good grade on a surprise quiz might well offset the bad grade he had surely made on the recent political test, now being corrected by his neighbor Mr. Stone.

On the screen bloomed now lovely, tranquil features, the pale skin and dark, intelligent eyes, the wise and yet pert face of the woman who had come to monopolize their attention, on whom an entire nation, almost an entire planet, dwelt obsessively. At the sight of her, Ian Duncan felt engulfed by fear. He had failed her; his rotten test results were somehow known to her and although she would say nothing, the disappointment was there.

“Good evening,” Nicole said in her soft, slightly-husky voice.

“It’s this way,” Ian Duncan found himself mumbling. “I don’t have a head for abstractions; I mean, all this religio-political philosophy — it makes no sense to me. Couldn’t I just concentrate on concrete reality? I ought to be baking bricks or turning out shoes.” I ought to be on Mars, he thought, on the frontier. I’m flunking out here; at thirty-five I’m washed up, *and she knows it.* Let me go, Nicole, he thought in desperation. Don’t give me any more tests, because I don’t have a chance of passing them. Even this program about the ocean’s bottom; by the time it’s over I’ll have forgotten all the data. I’m no use to the Democratic-Republican Party.

He thought about his brother, then. Al could help me. Al worked for Loony Luke, at one of his jalopy jungles, peddling the little tin and plastic ships that even defeated people could afford, ships that could, if luck was with them, successfully make a one-way trip to Mars. Al, he said to himself, you could get me a jalopy — wholesale.

On the TV screen, Nicole was saying, “And really, it is a world of much enchantment, with luminous entities far surpassing in variety and in sheer delightful wonder anything found on other planets. Scientists compute that there are more forms of life in the ocean —”

Her face faded, and a sequence showing odd, grotesque fish segued into its place. This is part of the deliberate propaganda line, Ian Duncan realized. An effort to take our minds off of Mars and the idea of getting away from the Party… and from her. On the screen a bulbous-eyed fish gaped at him, and his attention, despite himself, was captured. Chrissakes, he thought, it is a weird world down there. Nicole, he thought, you’ve got me trapped. If only Al and I had succeeded; we might be performing right now for you, and we’d be happy. While you interviewed world-famous oceanographers Al and I would be discreetly playing in the background, perhaps one of the Bach “Two Part Inventions.”

Going to the closet of his apartment, Ian Duncan bent down and carefully lifted a cloth-wrapped object into the light. We had so much youthful faith in this, he recalled. Tenderly, he unwrapped the jug; then, taking a deep breath, he blew a couple of hollow notes on it. The Duncan Brothers and Their Two-man Jug Band, he and Al had been, playing their own arrangements for two jugs of Bach and Mozart and Stravinsky. But the White House talent scout — the skunk. He had never even given them a fair audition. It had been done, he told them. Jesse Pigg, the fabulous jug-artist from Alabama, had gotten to the White House first, entertaining and delighting the dozen and one members of the Thibodeaux family gathered there with his version of “Derby Ram” and “John Henry” and the like.

“But,” Ian Duncan had protested, “this is *classical* jug. We play late Beethoven sonatas.”

“We’ll call you,” the talent scout had said briskly. “If Nicky shows an interest at any time in the future.”

Nicky! He had blanched. Imagine being that intimate with the First Family. He and Al, mumbling pointlessly, had retired from the stage with their jugs, making way for the next act, a group of dogs dressed up in Elizabethan costumes portraying characters from Hamlet. The dogs had not made it, either, but that was little consolation.

“I am told,” Nicole was saying, “that there is so little light in the ocean depths that, well, observe this strange fellow.” A fish, sporting a glowing lantern before him, swam across the TV screen.

Startling him, there came a knock on the apartment door. With anxiety Duncan answered it; he found his neighbor Mr. Stone standing there, looking nervous.

“You weren’t at All Souls?” Mr. Stone said. “Won’t they check and find out?” He held in his hands Ian Duncan’s corrected test.

Duncan said, “Tell me how I did.” He prepared himself.

Entering the apartment, Stone shut the door after him. He glanced at the TV set, saw Nicole seated with the oceanographers, listened for a moment to her, then abruptly said in a hoarse voice, “You did fine.” He held out the test.

Duncan said, “I passed?” He could not believe it. He accepted the papers, examined them with incredulity. And then he understood what had happened. Stone had conspired to see that he passed; he had falsified the score, probably out of humanitarian motives. Duncan raised his head and they looked at each other, neither speaking. This is terrible, Duncan thought. What’ll I do now? His reaction amazed him, but there it was.

I wanted to fail, he realized. Why? So I can get out of here, so I would have an excuse to give up all this, my apartment and my job, and go. Emigrate with nothing more than the shirt on my back, in a jalopy that falls to pieces the moment it comes to rest in the Martian wilderness.

“Thanks,” he said glumly.

In a rapid voice, Stone said, “You can do the same for me sometime.”

“Oh yeah, be happy to,” Duncan said.

Scuttling back out of the apartment, Stone left him alone with the TV set, his jug and the falsely-corrected test papers, and his thoughts.

Al, you’ve got to help me, he said to himself. You’ve got to get me out of this; I can’t even fail on my own.

In the little structure at the back of Jalopy Jungle No. 3, Al Duncan sat with his feet on the desk, smoking a cigarette and watching passersby, the sidewalk and people and stores of downtown Reno, Nevada. Beyond the gleam of the new jalopies parked with flapping banners and streamers

cascading from them he saw a shape waiting, hiding beneath the sign that spelled out LOONY LUKE.

And he was not the only person to see the shape; along the sidewalk came a man and woman with a small boy trotting ahead of them, and the boy, with an exclamation, hopped up and down, gesturing excitedly. “Hey, Dad, look! You know what it is? Look, it’s the papoola.”

“By golly,” the man said with a grin, “so it is. Look, Marion, there’s one of those Martian creatures, hiding there under that sign. What do you say we go over and chat with it?” He started in that direction, along with the boy. The woman, however, continued along the sidewalk.

“Come on, Mom!” the boy urged.

In his office, Al lightly touched the controls of the mechanism within his shirt. The papoola emerged from beneath the LOONY LUKE sign, and Al caused it to waddle on its six stubby legs toward the sidewalk, its round, silly hat slipping over one antenna, its eyes crossing and uncrossing as it made out the sight of the woman. The tropism being established, the papoola trudged after her, to the delight of the boy and his father.

“Look, Dad, it’s following Mom! Hey Mom, turn around and see!”

The woman glanced back, saw the platter-like organism with its orange bug-shaped body, and she laughed. Everybody loves the papoola, Al thought to himself. See the funny Martian papoola. Speak, papoola; say hello to the nice lady who’s laughing at you.

The thoughts of the papoola, directed at the woman, reached Al. It was greeting her, telling her how nice it was to meet her, soothing and coaxing her until she came back up the sidewalk toward it, joining her boy and husband so that now all three of them stood together, receiving the mental impulses emanating from the Martian creature which had come here to Earth with no hostile plans, no capacity to cause trouble. The papoola loved them, too, just as they loved it; it told them so right now — it conveyed to

them the gentleness, the warm hospitality which it was accustomed to on its own planet.

What a wonderful place Mars must be, the man and woman were no doubt thinking, as the papoola poured out its recollections, its attitude. Gosh, it's not cold and schizoid, like Earth society; nobody spies on anybody else, grades their innumerable political tests, reports on them to building Security committees week in, week out. Think of it, the papoola was telling them as they stood rooted to the sidewalk, unable to pass on. You're your own boss, there, free to work your land, believe your own beliefs, become *yourself.* Look at you, afraid even to stand here listening. Afraid to —

In a nervous voice the man said to his wife, "We better go."

"Oh no," the boy said pleadingly. "I mean, gee, how often do you get to talk to a papoola? It must belong to that jalopy jungle, there." The boy pointed, and Al found himself under the man's keen, observing scrutiny.

The man said, "Of course. They landed here to sell jalopies. It's working on us right now, softening us up." The enchantment visibly faded from his face. "There's the man sitting in there operating it."

But, the papoola thought, what I tell you is still true. Even if it is a sales pitch. You could go there, to Mars, yourself. You and your family can see with your own eyes — if you have the courage to break free. Can you do it? Are you a real man? Buy a Loony Luke jalopy … buy it while you still have the chance, because you know that someday, maybe not so long from now, the law is going to crack down. And there will be no more jalopy jungles. No more crack in the wall of the authoritarian society through which a few — a few lucky people — can escape.

Fiddling with the controls at his midsection, Al turned up the gain. The force of the papoola's psyche increased, drawing the man in, taking control of him. You must buy a jalopy, the papoola urged. Easy payment plan, service warranty, many models to choose from. The man took a step toward

the lot. Hurry, the papoola told him. Any second now the authorities may close down the lot and your opportunity will be gone forever.

"This is how they work it," the man said with difficulty. "The animal snares people. Hypnosis. We have to leave." But he did not leave; it was too late: he was going to buy a jalopy, and Al, in the office with his control box, was reeling the man in.

Leisurely, Al rose to his feet. Time to go out and close the deal. He shut off the papoola, opened the office door and stepped outside onto the lot — and saw a once-familiar figure threading its way among the jalopies, toward him. It was his brother Ian and he had not seen him in years. Good grief, Al thought. What's he want? And at a time like this —

"Al," his brother called, gesturing. "Can I talk with you a second? You're not too busy, are you?" Perspiring and pale, he came closer, looking about in a frightened way. He had deteriorated since Al had last seen him.

"Listen," Al said, with anger. But already it was too late; the couple and their boy had broken away and were moving rapidly on down the sidewalk.

"I don't mean to bother you," Ian mumbled.

"You're not bothering me," Al said as he gloomily watched the three people depart. "What's the trouble, Ian? You don't look very well; are you sick? Come on in the office." He led his brother inside and shut the door.

Ian said, "I came across my jug. Remember when we were trying to make it to the White House? Al, we have to try once more. Honest to God, I can't go on like this; I can't stand to be a failure at what we agreed was the most important thing in our lives." Panting, he mopped at his forehead with his handkerchief, his hands trembling.

"I don't even have my jug any more," Al said presently.

“You must. Well, we could each record our parts separately on my jug and then synthesize them on one tape, and present that to the White House. This trapped feeling; I don’t know if I can go on living with it. I have to get back to playing. If we started practicing right now on the ‘Goldberg Variations’ in two months we —”

Al broke in, “You still live at that place? That Abraham Lincoln?”

Ian nodded.

“And you still have that position down in Palo Alto, you’re still a gear inspector?” He could not understand why his brother was so upset. “Hell, if worse comes to worst you can emigrate. Jug-playing is out of the question; I haven’t played for years, since I last saw you in fact. Just a minute.” He dialed the knobs of the mechanism which controlled the papoola; near the sidewalk the creature responded and began to return slowly to its spot beneath the sign.

Seeing it, Ian said, “I thought they were all dead.”

“They are,” Al said.

“But that one out there moves and —

“It’s a fake,” Al said. “A puppet. I control it.” He showed his brother the control box. “It brings in people off the sidewalk. Actually, Luke is supposed to have a real one on which these are modeled. Nobody knows for sure and the law can’t touch Luke because technically he’s now a citizen of Mars; they can’t make him cough up the real one, if he does have it.” Al seated himself and lit a cigarette. “Fail your *relpol* test,” he said to Ian, “lose your apartment and get back your original deposit; bring me the money and I’ll see that you get a damn fine jalopy that’ll carry you to Mars. Okay?”

“I tried to fail my test,” Ian said, “but they won’t let me. They doctored the results. They don’t want me to get away.”

“Who’s ‘they’?”

“The man in the next apartment. Ed Stone, his name is. He did it deliberately; I saw the look on his face. Maybe he thought he was doing me a favor… I don’t know.” He looked around him. “This is a nice little office you have here. You sleep in it, don’t you? And when it moves, you move with it.”

“Yeah,” Al said, “we’re always ready to take off.” The police had almost gotten him a number of times, even though the lot could obtain orbital velocity in six minutes. The papoola had detected their approach, but not sufficiently far in advance for a comfortable escape; generally it was hurried and disorganized, with part of his inventory of jalopies being left behind.

“You’re just one jump ahead of them,” Ian mused. “And yet it doesn’t bother you. I guess it’s all in your attitude.”

“If they get me,” Al said, “Luke will bail me out.” The shadowy, powerful figure of his boss was always there, backing him up, so what did he have to worry about? The jalopy tycoon knew a million tricks. The Thibodeaux clan limited their attacks on him to deep-think articles in popular magazines and on TV, harping on Luke’s vulgarity and the shoddiness of his vehicles; they were a little afraid of him, no doubt.

“I envy you,” Ian said. “Your poise. Your calmness.”

“Doesn’t your apartment building have a sky pilot? Go talk to him.”

Ian said bitterly, “That’s no good. Right now it’s Patrick Doyle and he’s as bad off as I am. And Don Klugman, our chairman, is even worse off; he’s a bundle of nerves. In fact our whole building is shot through with anxiety. Maybe it has to do with Nicole’s sinus headaches.”

Glancing at his brother, Al saw that he was actually serious. The White House and all it stood for meant that much to him; it still dominated his life, as it had when they were boys. “For your sake,” Al said quietly, “I’ll get my jug out and practice. We’ll make one more try.”

Speechless, Ian gaped at him in gratitude.

Seated together in the business office of the Abraham Lincoln, Don Klugman and Patrick Doyle studied the application which Mr. Ian Duncan of no. 304 had filed with them. Ian desired to appear in the twice-weekly talent show, and at a time when a White House talent scout was present. The request, Klugman saw, was routine, except that Ian proposed to do his act in conjunction with another individual *who did not live at Abraham Lincoln.*

Doyle said, “It’s his brother. He told me once; the two of them used to have this act, years ago. Baroque music on two jugs. A novelty.”

“What apartment house does his brother live in?” Klugman asked. Approval of the application would depend on how relations stood between the Abraham Lincoln and the other building.

“None. He sells jalopies for that Loony Luke — you know. Those cheap little ships that get you just barely to Mars. He lives on one of the lots, I understand. The lots move around; it’s a nomadic existence. I’m sure you’ve heard.”

“Yes,” Klugman agreed, “and it’s totally out of the question. We can’t have that act on our stage, not with a man like that involved in it. There’s no reason why Ian Duncan can’t play his jug; it’s a basic political right and I wouldn’t be surprised if it’s a satisfactory act. But it’s against our tradition to have an outsider participate; our stage is for our own people exclusively, always has been and always will. So there’s no need even to discuss this.” He eyed the sky pilot critically.

“True,” Doyle said, “but it is a blood relative of one of our people, right? It’s legal for one of us to invite a relative to watch the talent shows … so why not let him participate? This means a lot to Ian; I think you know he’s been failing, lately. He’s not a very intelligent person. Actually, he should be doing a manual job, I suppose. But if he has artistic ability, for instance this jug concept — “

Examining his documents, Klugman saw that a White House scout would be attending a show at the Abraham Lincoln in two weeks. The best acts at the building would of course be scheduled that night… the Duncan Brothers and Their Baroque Jug Band would have to compete successfully in order to obtain that privilege, and there were a number of acts which — Klugman thought — were probably superior. After all, *jugs*… and not even electronic jugs, at that.

“All right,” he said aloud to Doyle. “I agree.”

“You’re showing your humane side,” the sky pilot said, with a grin of sentimentality which disgusted Klugman. “And I think we’ll all enjoy the Bach and Vivaldi as played by the Duncan Brothers on their inimitable jugs.”

Klugman, wincing, nodded.

On the big night, as they started into the auditorium on floor one of Abraham Lincoln Apartments, Ian Duncan saw, trailing along behind his brother, the flat, scuttling shape of the Martian creature, the papoola. He stopped short. “You’re bringing that along?”

Al said, “You don’t understand. Don’t we have to win?”

After a pause, Ian said, “Not that way.” He understood, all right; the papoola would take on the audience as it had taken on sidewalk traffic. It would exert its extra-sensory influence on them, coaxing out a favorable decision. So much for the ethics of a jalopy salesman, Ian realized. To his

brother, this seemed perfectly normal; if they couldn't win by their jug-playing they would win through the papoola.

"Aw," Al said, gesturing, "don't be your own worst enemy. All we're engaged in here is a little subliminal sales technique, such as they've been using for a century — it's an ancient, reputable method of swinging public opinion your way. I mean, let's face it; we haven't played the jug professionally in years." He touched the controls at his waist and the papoola hurried forward to catch up with them. Again Al touched the controls —

And in Ian's mind a persuasive thought came, *Why not?* Everyone else does it.

With difficulty he said, "Get that thing off me, Al."

Al shrugged. And the thought, which had invaded Ian's mind from without, gradually withdrew. And yet, a residue remained. He was no longer sure of his position.

"It's nothing compared to what Nicole's machinery can accomplish," Al pointed out, seeing the expression on his face. "One papoola here and there, and that planetwide instrument that Nicole has made out of TV — there you have the real danger, Ian. The papoola is crude; you know you're being worked on. Not so when you listen to Nicole. The pressure is so subtle and so complete —"

"I don't know about that," Ian said, "I just know that unless we're successful, unless we get to play at the White House, life as far as I'm concerned isn't worth living. And nobody put that idea in my head. It's just the way I feel; it's my own idea, dammit." He held the door open, and Al passed on into the auditorium, carrying his jug by the handle. Ian followed, and a moment later the two of them were on the stage, facing the partially-filled hall.

"Have you ever seen her?" Al asked.

“I see her all the time.”

“I mean in reality. In person. So to speak, in the flesh.”

“Of course not,” Ian said. That was the whole point of their being successful, of getting to the White House. They would see her really, not just the TV image; it would no longer be a fantasy — it would be true.

“I saw her once,” Al said. “I had just put the lot down, Jalopy Jungle No. 3, on a main business avenue in Shreveport, La. It was early in the morning, about eight o’clock. I saw official cars coming; naturally I thought it was the police — I started to take off. But it wasn’t. It was a motorcade, with Nicole in it, going to dedicate a new apartment building, the largest yet.”

“Yes,” Ian said. “The Paul Bunyan.” The football team from Abraham Lincoln played annually against its team, and always lost. The Paul Bunyan had over ten thousand residents, and all of them came from administrative-class backgrounds; it was an exclusive apartment building of active Party members, with uniquely high monthly payments.

“You should have seen her,” Al said thoughtfully as he sat facing the audience, his jug on his lap. He tapped the papoola with his foot; it had taken up a position beneath his chair, out of sight. “Yes,” he murmured, “you really should. It’s not the same as on TV, Ian. Not at all.”

Ian nodded. He had begun to feel apprehensive, now; in a few minutes they would be introduced. Their test had come.

Seeing him gripping his jug tautly, Al said, “Shall I use the papoola or not? It’s up to you.” He raised a quizzical brow.

Ian said, “Use it.”

“Okay,” Al said, reaching his hand inside his coat. Leisurely, he stroked the controls. And, from beneath his chair, the papoola rolled forth, its antennae twitching drolly, its eyes crossing and uncrossing.

At once the audience became alert; people leaned forward to see, some of them chuckling with delight.

“Look,” a man said excitedly. It was old Joe Purd, as eager as a child. “It’s the papoola!”

A woman rose to her feet to see more clearly, and Ian thought to himself, *Everyone loves the papoola.* We’ll win, whether we can play the jug or not. And then what? Will meeting Nicole make us even more unhappy than we are? Is that what we’ll get out of this: hopeless, massive discontent? An ache, a longing which can never be satisfied in this world?

It was too late to back out, now. The doors of the auditorium had shut and Don Klugman was rising from his chair, rapping for order. “Okay, folks,” he said into his lapel microphone. “We’re going to have a little display of some talent, right now, for everyone’s enjoyment. As you see on your programs, first in order is a fine group, the Duncan Brothers and their Classical Jugs with a medley of Bach and Handel tunes that ought to set your feet tapping.” He beamed archly at Ian and Al, as if saying, How does that suit you as an intro?

Al paid no attention; he manipulated his controls and gazed thoughtfully at the audience, then at last picked up his jug, glanced at Ian and then tapped his foot. “The Little Fugue in G Minor” opened their medley, and Al began to blow on the jug, sending forth the lively theme.

Bum, bum, bum. Bum-bum bum-bum bum bum de bum. DE bum, DE bum, de de-de bum … His cheeks puffed out red and swollen as he blew.

The papoola wandered across the stage, then lowered itself, by a series of gangly, foolish motions, into the first row of the audience. It had begun to go to work.

The news posted on the communal bulletin board outside the cafeteria of the Abraham Lincoln that the Duncan Brothers had been chosen by the talent scout to perform at the White House astounded Edgar Stone. He read the announcement again and again, wondering how the little nervous, cringing man had managed to do it.

There's been cheating, Stone said to himself. Just as I passed him on his political tests … he's got somebody else to falsify a few results for him along the talent line: He himself had heard the jugs; he had been present at that program, and the Duncan Brothers, Classical Jugs, were simply not that good. They were *good,* admittedly … but intuitively he knew that more was involved.

Deep inside him he felt anger, a resentment that he had falsified Duncan's test-score. I put him on the road to success, Stone realized; I saved him. And now he's on his way to the White House.

No wonder Duncan did so poorly on his political test, Stone said to himself. He was busy practicing on his jug; he has no time for the commonplace realities which the rest of us have to cope with. It must be great to be an artist, Stone thought with bitterness. You're exempt from all the rules, you can do as you like.

He sure made a fool out of me, Stone realized.

Striding down the second floor hall, Stone arrived at the office of the building sky pilot; he rang the bell and the door opened, showing him the sight of the sky pilot deep in work at his desk, his face wrinkled with fatigue. "Urn, father," Stone said, "I'd like to confess. Can you spare a few minutes? It's very urgently on my mind, my sins I mean."

Rubbing his forehead, Patrick Doyle nodded. "Jeez," he murmured. "It either rains or it pours; I've had ten residents in today so far, using the confessionator. Go ahead." He pointed to the alcove which opened onto his

office. “Sit down and plug yourself in. I’ll be listening while I fill out these 4-10 forms from Boise.”

Filled with wrathful indignation, his hands trembling, Edgar Stone attached the electrodes of the confessionator to the correct spots of his scalp, and then, picking up the microphone, began to confess. The tape-drums of the machine turned as he spoke. “Moved by a false pity,” he said, “I infracted a rule of the building. But mainly I am concerned not with the act itself but with the motives behind it; the act merely is the outgrowth of a false attitude toward my fellow residents. This person, my neighbor Mr. Duncan, did poorly in his recent *relpol* test and I foresaw him being evicted from Abraham Lincoln. I identified with him because subconsciously I regard myself as a failure, both as a resident of this building and as a man, so I falsified his score to indicate that he had passed. Obviously, a new *relpol* test will have to be given to Mr. Duncan and the one which I scored will have to be voided.” He eyed the sky pilot, but there was no reaction.

That will take care of Ian Duncan and his Classical Jug, Stone said to himself.

By now the confessionator had analyzed his confession; it popped a card out, and Doyle rose to his feet wearily to receive it. After a careful study he glanced up. “Mr. Stone,” he said, “the view expressed here is that your confession is no confession. What do you really have on your mind? Go back and begin all over; you haven’t probed down deeply enough and brought up the genuine material. And I suggest you start out by confessing that you misconfessed consciously and deliberately.”

“No such thing,” Stone said, but his voice — even to him — sounded feeble. “Perhaps I could discuss this with you informally. I did falsify Ian Duncan’s test score. Now, maybe my motives for doing it —”

Doyle interrupted, “Aren’t you jealous of Duncan now? What with his success with the jug, White House-ward?”

There was silence.

“This could be,” Stone admitted at last. “But it doesn’t change the fact that by all rights Ian Duncan shouldn’t be living here; he should be evicted, my motives notwithstanding. Look it up in the Communal Apartment-building Code. I know there’s a section covering a situation like this.”

“But you can’t get out of here,” the sky pilot said, “without confessing; you have to satisfy the machine. You’re attempting to force eviction of a neighbor to fulfill your own emotional needs. Confess that, and then perhaps we can discuss the code ruling as it pertains to Duncan.”

Stone groaned and once more attached the electrodes to his scalp. “All right,” he grated. “I hate Ian Duncan because he’s artistically gifted and I’m not. I’m willing to be examined by a twelve-resident jury of my neighbors to see what the penalty for my sin is — but I insist that Duncan be given another *relpol* test! I won’t give up on this; he has no right to be living here among us. It’s morally and legally *wrong!”*

“At least you’re being honest, now,” Doyle said.

“Actually,” Stone said, “I enjoy jug band playing; I liked their music, the other night. But I have to act in what I believe to be the communal interest.”

The confessionator, it seemed to him, snorted in derision as it popped a second card. But perhaps it was only his imagination.

“You’re just getting yourself deeper,” Doyle said, reading the card. “Look at this.” He passed the card to Stone. “Your mind is a riot of confused, ambivalent motives. When was the last time you confessed?”

Flushing, Stone mumbled, “I think last August. Pepe Jones was the sky pilot, then.”

“A lot of work will have to be done with you,” Doyle said, lighting a cigarette and leaning back in his chair.

The opening number on their White House performance, they had decided after much discussion and argument, would be the Bach “Chaconne in D.” Al had always liked it, despite the difficulties involved, the double-stopping and all. Even thinking about the “Chaconne” made Ian nervous. He wished, now that it had been decided, that he had held out for the simpler “Fifth Unaccompanied Cello Suite.” But too late now. Al had sent the information on to the White House A & R — artists and repertory — secretary, Harold Slezak.

Al said, “Don’t worry; you’ve got the number two jug in this. Do you mind being second jug to me?”

“No,” Ian said. It was a relief, actually; Al had the far more difficult part.

Outside the perimeter of Jalopy Jungle No. 3 the papoola moved, crisscrossing the sidewalk in its gliding, quiet pursuit of a sales prospect. It was only ten in the morning and no one worth collaring had come along, as yet. Today the lot had set down in the hilly section of Oakland, California, among the winding tree-lined streets of the better residential section. Across from the lot, Ian could see the Joe Louis, a peculiarly-shaped but striking apartment building of a thousand units, mostly occupied by well-to-do Negroes. The building, in the morning sun, looked especially neat and cared for. A guard, with badge and gun, patrolled the entrance, stopping anyone who did not live there from entering.

“Slezak has to okay the program,” Al reminded him. “Maybe Nicole won’t want to hear the ‘Chaconne’; she’s got very specialized tastes and they’re changing all the time.”

In his mind Ian saw Nicole, propped up in her enormous bed, in her pink, frilly robe, her breakfast on a tray beside her as she scanned the program schedules presented to her for her approval. Already she’s heard about us, he thought. *She knows of our existence.* In that case, we really do

exist. Like a child that has to have its mother watching what it does; we're brought into being, validated consensually, by Nicole's gaze.

And when she takes her eye off us, he thought, then what? What happens to us afterward? Do we disintegrate, sink back into oblivion?

Back, he thought, into random, unformed atoms. Where we came from … the world of nonbeing. The world we've been in all our lives, up until now.

"And," Al said, "she may ask us for an encore. She may even request a particular favorite. I've researched it, and it seems she sometimes asks to hear Schumann's 'The Happy Farmer.' Got that in mind? We'd better work up 'The Happy Farmer,' just in case." He blew a few toots on his jug, thoughtfully.

"I can't do it," Ian said abruptly. "I can't go on. It means too much to me. Something will go wrong; we won't please her and they'll boot us out. And we'll never be able to forget it."

"Look," Al began. "We have the papoola. And that gives us —" He broke off. A tall, stoop-shouldered elderly man in an expensive natural-fiber blue pin-stripe suit was coming up the sidewalk. "My God, it's Luke himself," Al said. He looked frightened. "I've only seen him twice before in my life. Something must be wrong."

"Better reel in the papoola," Ian said. The papoola had begun to move toward Loony Luke.

With a bewildered expression on his face Al said, "I can't." He fiddled desperately with the controls at his waist. "It won't respond."

The papoola reached Luke, and Luke bent down, picked it up and continued on toward the lot, the papoola under his arm.

“He’s taken precedence over me,” Al said. He looked at his brother numbly.

The door of the little structure opened and Loony Luke entered. “We received a report that you’ve been using this on your own time, for purposes of your own,” he said to Al, his voice low and gravelly. “You were told not to do that; the papoolas belong to the lots, not to the operators.”

Al said, “Aw, come on, Luke.”

“You ought to be fired,” Luke said, “but you’re a good salesman so I’ll keep you on. Meanwhile, you’ll have to make your quota without help.” Tightening his grip on the papoola, he started back out. “My time is valuable; I have to go.” He saw Al’s jug. “That’s not a musical instrument; it’s a thing to put whiskey in.”

Al said, “Listen, Luke, this is publicity. Performing for Nicole means that the network of jalopy jungles will gain prestige; got it?”

“I don’t want prestige,” Luke said, pausing at the door. “There’s no catering to Nicole Thibodeaux by me; let her run her society the way she wants and I’ll run the jungles the way I want. She leaves me alone and I leave her alone and that’s fine with me. Don’t mess it up. Tell Slezak you can’t appear and forget about it; no grown man in his right senses would be hooting into an empty bottle anyhow.”

“That’s where you’re wrong,” Al said. “Art can be found in the most mundane daily walks of life, like in these jugs for instance.”

Luke, picking his teeth with a silver toothpick, said, “Now you don’t have a papoola to soften the First Family up for you. Better think about that… do you really expect to make it without the papoola?”

After a pause Al said to Ian, “He’s right. The papoola did it for us. But — hell, let’s go on anyhow.”

“You’ve got guts,” Luke said. “But no sense. Still, I have to admire you. I can see why you’ve been a top notch salesman for the organization; you don’t give up. Take the papoola the night you perform at the White House and then return it to me the next morning.” He tossed the round, bug-like creature to Al; grabbing it, Al hugged it against his chest like a big pillow. “Maybe it would be good publicity for the jungles,” Luke said. “But I know this. Nicole doesn’t like us. Too many people have slipped out of her hands by means of us; we’re a leak in mama’s structure and mama knows it.” He grinned, showing gold teeth.

Al said, “Thanks, Luke.”

“But I’ll operate the papoola,” Luke said. “By remote. I’m a little more skilled than you; after all, I *built* them.”

“Sure,” Al said. “I’ll have my hands full playing anyhow.”

“Yes,” Luke said, “you’ll need both hands for that bottle.”

Something in Luke’s tone made Ian Duncan uneasy. What’s he up to? he wondered. But in any case he and his brother had no choice; they had to have the papoola working for them. And no doubt Luke could do a good job of operating it; he had already proved his superiority over Al, just now, and as Luke said, Al would be busy blowing away on his jug. But still —

“Loony Luke,” Ian said, “have you ever met Nicole?” It was a sudden thought on his part, an unexpected intuition.

“Sure,” Luke said steadily. “Years ago. I had some hand puppets; my Dad and I traveled around putting on puppet shows. We finally played the White House.”

“What happened there?” Ian asked.

Luke, after a pause, said, “She didn’t care for us. Said something about our puppets being indecent.”

And you hate her, Ian realized. You never forgave her. “Were they?” he asked Luke.

“No,” Luke answered. “True, one act was a strip show; we had follies girl puppets. But nobody ever objected before. My Dad took it hard but it didn’t bother me.” His face was impassive.

Al said, “Was Nicole the First Lady that far back?”

“Oh yes,” Luke said. “She’s been in office for seventy-three years; didn’t you know that?”

“It isn’t possible,” both Al and Ian said, almost together.

“Sure it is,” Luke said. “She’s a really old woman, now. A grandmother. But she still looks good, I guess. You’ll know when you see her.”

Stunned, Ian said, “On TV —”

“Oh yeah,” Luke agreed. “On TV she looks around twenty. But look in the history books yourself; figure it out. The facts are all there.”

The facts, Ian realized, mean nothing when you can see with your own eyes that she’s as young-looking as ever. And we see that every day.

Luke, you’re lying, he thought. We know it; we all know it. My brother saw her; Al would have said, if she was really like that. You hate her; that’s your motive. Shaken, he turned his back to Luke, not wanting to have anything to do with the man, now. Seventy-three years in office — that would make Nicole almost ninety, now. He shuddered at the idea; he blocked it out of his thoughts. Or at least he tried to.

“Good luck, boys,” Luke said, chewing on his toothpick.

In his sleep Ian Duncan had a terrible dream. A hideous old woman with greenish, wrinkled claws scrabbled at him, whining for him to do something — he did not know what it was because her voice, her words, blurred into indistinction, swallowed by her broken-toothed mouth, lost in the twisting thread of saliva which found its way to her chin. He struggled to free himself…

“Chrissake,” Al’s voice came to him. “Wake up; we have to get the lot moving; we’re supposed to be at the White House in three hours.”

Nicole, Ian realized as he sat up groggily. It was her I was dreaming about; ancient and withered, but still her. “Okay,” he muttered as he rose unsteadily from the cot. “Listen, Al,” he said, “suppose she is old, like Loony Luke says? What then? What’ll we do?”

“We’ll perform,” Al said. “Play our jugs.”

“But I couldn’t live through it,” Ian said. “My ability to adjust is just too brittle. This is turning into a nightmare; Luke controls the papoola and Nicole is old — what’s the point of our going on? Can’t we go back to just seeing her on the TV and maybe once in our lifetime at a great distance like you did in Shreveport? That’s good enough for me, now. I want that, the image; okay?”

“No,” Al said doggedly. “We have to see this through. Remember, you can always emigrate to Mars.”

The lot had already risen, was already moving toward the East Coast and Washington, D.C.

When they landed, Slezak, a rotund, genial little individual, greeted them warmly; he shook hands with them as they walked toward the service entrance of the White House. “Your program is ambitious,” he bubbled,

“but if you can fulfill it, fine with me, with us here, the First Family I mean, and in particular the First Lady herself who is actively enthusiastic about all forms of original artistry. According to your biographical data you two made a thorough study of primitive disc recordings from the early nineteen hundreds, as early as 1920, of jug bands surviving from the U.S. Civil War, so you’re authentic juggists except of course you’re classical, not folk.”

“Yes sir,” Al said.

“Could you, however, slip in one folk number?” Slezak asked as they passed the guards at the service entrance and entered the White House, the long, carpeted corridor with its artificial candles set at intervals. “For instance, we suggest ‘Rockabye My Sarah Jane.’ Do you have that in your repertoire? If not —”

“We have it,” Al said shortly. “We’ll add it toward the end.”

“Fine,” Slezak said, prodding them amiably ahead of him. “Now may I ask what this creature you carry is?” He eyed the papoola with something less than enthusiasm. “Is it alive?”

“It’s our totem animal,” Al said.

“You mean a superstitious charm? A mascot?”

“Exactly,” Al said. “With it we assuage anxiety.” He patted the papoola’s head. “And it’s part of our act; it dances while we play. You know, like a monkey.”

“Well I’ll be darned,” Slezak said, his enthusiasm returning. “I see, now. Nicole will be delighted; she loves soft, furry things.” He held a door open ahead of them.

And there she sat.

How could Luke have been so wrong? Ian thought. She was even lovelier than on TV, and much more distinct; that was the main difference, the fabulous authenticity of her appearance, its reality to the senses. The senses knew the difference. Here she sat, in faded blue-cotton trousers, moccasins on her feet, a carelessly-buttoned white shirt through which he could see — or imagined he could see — her tanned, smooth skin … how informal she was, Ian thought. Lacking in pretense or show. Her hair cut short, exposing her beautifully-formed neck and ears. And, he thought, so darn young. She did not look even twenty. And the vitality. The TV could not catch that, the delicate glow of color and line all about her.

"Nicky," Slezak said, "these are the classical juggists."

She glanced up, sideways; she had been reading a newspaper. Now she smiled. "Good morning," she said. "Did you have breakfast? We could serve you some Canadian bacon and butterhorns and coffee if you want." Her voice, oddly, did not seem to come from her; it materialized from the upper part of the room, almost at the ceiling. Looking that way, Ian saw a series of speakers and he realized that a glass barrier separated Nicole from them, a security measure to protect her. He felt disappointed and yet he understood why it was necessary. If anything happened to her —

"We ate, Mrs. Thibodeaux," Al said. "Thanks." He, too, was glancing up at the speakers.

We ate Mrs. Thibodeaux, Ian thought crazily. Isn't it actually the other way around? Doesn't she, sitting here in her blue-cotton pants and shirt, doesn't she devour us?

Now the President, Taufic Negal, a slender, dapper, dark man, entered behind Nicole, and she lifted her face up to him and said, "Look, Taffy, they have one of those papoolas with them — won't that be fun?"

"Yes," the President said, smiling, standing beside his wife.

“Could I see it?” Nicole asked Al. “Let it come here.” She made a signal, and the glass wall began to lift.

Al dropped the papoola and it scuttled toward Nicole, beneath the raised security barrier; it hopped up, and all at once Nicole held it in her strong hands, gazing down at it intently.

“Heck,” she said, “it’s not alive; it’s just a toy.”

“None survived,” Al said. “As far as we know. But this is an authentic model, based on remains found on Mars.” He stepped toward her —

The glass barrier settled in place. Al was cut off from the papoola and he stood gaping foolishly, seemingly very upset. Then, as if by instinct, he touched the controls at his waist. Nothing happened for a time and then, at last, the papoola stirred. It slid from Nicole’s hands and hopped back to the floor. Nicole exclaimed in amazement, her eyes bright.

“Do you want it, dear?” her husband asked. “We can undoubtedly get you one, even several.”

“What does it do?” Nicole asked Al.

Slezak bubbled, “It dances, ma’am, when they play; it has rhythm in its bones — correct, Mr. Duncan? Maybe you could play something now, a shorter piece, to show Mrs. Thibodeaux.” He rubbed his hands together. Al and Ian looked at each other.

“S-sure,” Al said. “Uh, we could play that little Schubert thing, that arrangement of ‘The Trout.’ Okay, Ian, get set.” He unbuttoned the protective case from his jug, lifted it out and held it awkwardly. Ian did the same. “This is Al Duncan, here, at the first jug,” Al said. “And besides me is my brother Ian at the second jug, bringing you a concert of classical favorites, beginning with a little Schubert.” And then, at a signal from Al, they both began to play.

Bump bump-bump BUMP-BUMP buuump bump, ba-bump-bump bup-bup-bup-bup-bupppp. Nicole giggled.

We've failed, Ian thought. God, the worst has come about: we're ludicrous. He ceased playing; Al continued on, his cheeks red and swelling with the effort of playing. He seemed unaware that Nicole was holding her hand up to cover her laughter, her amusement at them and their efforts. Al played on, by himself, to the end of the piece, and then he, too, lowered his jug.

"The papoola," Nicole said, as evenly as possible. "It didn't dance. Not one little step — why not?" And again she laughed, unable to stop herself.

Al said woodenly, "I — don't have control of it; it's on remote, right now." To the papoola he said, "You better dance."

"Oh really, this is wonderful," Nicole said. "Look," she said to her husband, "he has to *beg it* to dance. Dance, whatever your name is, papoola-thing from Mars, or rather imitation papoola-thing from Mars." She prodded the papoola with the toe of her moccasin, trying to nudge it into life. "Come on, little synthetic ancient cute creature, all made out of wires. Please." The papoola leaped at her. It bit her.

Nicole screamed. A sharp *pop* sounded from behind her, and the papoola vanished into particles that swirled. A White House security guard stepped into sight, his rifle in his hands, peering intently at her and at the floating particles; his face was calm but his hands and the rifle quivered. Al began to curse to himself, chanting the words over and over again, the same three or four, unceasingly.

"Luke," he said then, to his brother. "He did it. Revenge. It's the end of us." He looked gray, worn-out. Reflexively he began wrapping his jug up once more, going through the motions step by step.

“You’re under arrest,” a second White House guard said, appearing behind them and training his gun on the two of them.

“Sure,” Al said listlessly, his head nodding, wobbling vacuously. “We had nothing to do with it so arrest us.”

Getting to her feet with the assistance of her husband, Nicole walked toward Al and Ian. “Did it bite me because I laughed?” she said in a quiet voice.

Slezak stood mopping his forehead. He said nothing; he merely stared at them sightlessly.

“I’m sorry,” Nicole said. “I made it angry, didn’t I? It’s a shame; we would have enjoyed your act.”

“Luke did it,” Al said.

” ‘Luke.’ ” Nicole studied him. “Loony Luke, you mean. He owns those dreadful jalopy jungles that come and go only a step from illegality. Yes, I know who you mean; I remember him.” To her husband she said, “I guess we’d better have him arrested, too.”

“Anything you say,” her husband said, writing on a pad of paper.

Nicole said, “This whole jug business… it was just a cover-up for an action hostile to us, wasn’t it? A crime against the state. We’ll have to rethink the entire philosophy of inviting performers here… perhaps it’s been a mistake. It gives too much access to anyone who has hostile intentions toward us. I’m sorry.” She looked sad and pale, now; she folded her arms and stood rocking back and forth, lost in thought.

“Believe me, Nicole,” Al began.

Introspectively, she said, “I’m not Nicole; don’t call me that. Nicole Thibodeaux died years ago. I’m Kate Rupert, the fourth one to take her place. I’m just an actress who looks enough like the original Nicole to be able to keep this job, and I wish sometimes, when something like this happens, that I didn’t have it. I have no real authority. There’s a council somewhere that governs … I’ve never even seen them.” To her husband she said, “They know about this, don’t they?”

“Yes,” he said, “they’ve already been informed.”

“You see,” she said to Al, “he, even the President, has more actual power than I.” She smiled wanly.

Al said, “How many attempts have there been on your life?”

“Six or seven,” she said. “All for psychological reasons. Unresolved Oedipal complexes or something like that. I don’t really care.” She turned to her husband, then. “I really think these two men here —” She pointed at Al and Ian. “They don’t seem to know what’s going on; maybe they are innocent.” To her husband and Slezak and the security guards she said, “Do they have to be destroyed? I don’t see why you couldn’t just eradicate a part of their memory-cells and let them go. Why wouldn’t that do?”

Her husband shrugged. “If you want it that way.”

“Yes,” she said. “I’d prefer that. It would make my job easier. Take them to the medical center at Bethesda and then let’s go on; let’s give an audience to the next performers.”

A security guard nudged Ian in the back with his gun. “Down the corridor, please.”

“Okay,” Ian murmured, gripping his jug. But what happened? he wondered. I don’t quite understand. This woman isn’t Nicole and even worse there is no Nicole anywhere; there’s just the TV image, the illusion, and behind it, behind her, another group entirely rules. A council of some

kind. But who are they and how did they get power? Will we ever know? We came so far; we almost seem to know what's really going on. The actuality behind the illusion… can't they tell us the rest? What difference would it make now? How —

"Goodbye," Al was saying to him.

"What?" he said, horrified. "Why do you say that? They're going to let us go, aren't they?"

Al said, "We won't remember each other. Take my word for it; we won't be allowed to keep any ties like that. So —" He held out his hand. "So goodbye, Ian. We made it to the White House. You won't remember that either, but it's true; we did do it." He grinned crookedly.

"Move along," the security guard said to them.

Holding their jugs, the two of them moved down the corridor, toward the door and the waiting black medical van beyond.

It was night, and Ian Duncan found himself at a deserted street corner, cold and shivering, blinking in the glaring white light of an urban monorail loading platform. What am I doing here? he asked himself, bewildered. He looked at his wristwatch; it was eight o'clock. I'm supposed to be at the All Souls Meeting, aren't I? he thought dazedly.

I can't miss another one, he realized. Two in a row — it's a terrible fine; it's economic ruin. He began to walk.

The familiar building, Abraham Lincoln with all its network of towers and windows, lay extended ahead; it was not far and he hurried, breathing deeply, trying to keep up a good steady pace. It must be over, he thought. The lights in the great central subsurface auditorium were not lit. Damn it, he breathed in despair.

“All Souls is over?” he said to the doorman as he entered the lobby, his identification held out.

“You’re a little confused, Mr. Duncan,” the doorman said, putting away his gun. “All Souls was last night; this is Friday.”

Something’s gone wrong, Ian realized. But he said nothing; he merely nodded and hurried on toward the elevator.

As he emerged from the elevator on his own floor, a door opened and a furtive figure beckoned to him. “Hey, Duncan.”

It was Corley. Warily, because an encounter like this could be disastrous, Ian approached him. “What is it?”

“A rumor,” Corley said in a rapid, fear-filled voice. “About your last *relpol* test — some irregularity. They’re going to rouse you at five or six A.M. tomorrow morning and spring a surprise quiz on you.” He glanced up and down the hall. “Study the late 1980s and the religio-collectivist movements in particular. Got it?”

“Sure,” Ian said, with gratitude. “And thanks a lot. Maybe I can do the same —” He broke off, because Corley had hurried back into his own apartment and shut the door; Ian was alone.

Certainly very nice of him, he thought as he walked on. Probably saved my hide, kept me from being forcibly ejected right out of here forever.

When he reached his apartment he made himself comfortable, with all his reference books on the political history of the United States spread out around him. I’ll study all night, he decided. Because I have to pass that quiz; I have no choice.

To keep himself awake, he turned on the TV. Presently the warm, familiar being, the presence of the First Lady, flowed into motion and began to fill the room.

"…and at our musical tonight," she was saying, "we will have a saxophone quartet which will play themes from Wagner's operas, in particular my favorite, 'Die Meistersinger.' I believe we will truly all find this a deeply rewarding and certainly an enriching experience to cherish. And, after that, my husband the President and I have arranged to bring you once again an old favorite of yours, the world renown cellist, Henri LeClercq, in a program of Jerome Kern and Cole Porter." She smiled, and at his pile of reference books, Ian Duncan smiled back.

I wonder how it would be to play at the White House, he said to himself. To perform before the First Lady. Too bad I never learned to play any kind of musical instrument. I can't act, write poems, dance or sing — nothing. So what hope is there for me? Now, if I had come from a musical family, if I had had a father or brothers to teach me how… .

Glumly, he scratched a few notes on the rise of the French Christian Fascist Party of 1975. And then, drawn as always to the TV set, he put his pen down and turned to face the set. Nicole was now exhibiting a piece of Delft tile which she had picked up, she explained, in a little shop in Vermont. What lovely clear colors it had… he watched, fascinated, as her strong, slim fingers caressed the shiny surface of the baked enamel tile.

"See the tile," Nicole was murmuring in her husky voice. "Don't you wish you had a tile like that? Isn't it lovely?"

"Yes," Ian Duncan said.

"How many of you would like someday to see such a tile?" Nicole asked. "Raise your hands."

Ian raised his hand hopefully.

“Oh, a whole lot of you,” Nicole said, smiling her intimate, radiant smile. “Well, perhaps later we will have another tour of the White House. Would you like that?”

Hopping up and down in his chair, Ian said, “Yes, I’d like that.”

On the TV screen she was smiling directly at him, it seemed. And so he smiled back. And then, reluctantly, feeling a great weight descend over him, he at last turned back to his reference books. Back to the harsh realities of his daily, endless life.

Against the window of his apartment something bumped and a voice called at him thinly, “Ian Duncan, I don’t have much time.”

Whirling, he saw outside in the night darkness a shape drifting, an egg-like construction that hovered. Within it a man waved at him energetically, still calling. The egg gave off a dull *putt-putt* noise, its jets idling as the man kicked open the hatch of the vehicle and then lifted himself out.

Are they after me already on this quiz? Ian Duncan asked himself. He stood up, feeling helpless. So soon… I’m not ready, yet.

Angrily, the man in the vehicle spun the jets until their steady white exhaust firing met the surface of the building; the room shuddered and bits of plaster broke away. The window itself collapsed as the heat of the jets crossed it. Through the gap exposed the man yelled once more, trying to attract Ian Duncan’s faculties.

“Hey, Duncan! Hurry up! I have your brother already; he’s on his way in another ship!” The man, elderly, wearing an expensive natural-fiber blue pin-stripe suit, lowered himself with dexterity from the hovering egg-shaped vehicle and dropped feet-first into the room. “We have to get going if we’re to make it. You don’t remember me? Neither did Al. Boy, I take off my hat to them.”

Ian Duncan stared at him, wondering who he was and who Al was and what was happening.

“Mama’s psychologists did a good, good job of working you over,” the elderly man panted. “That Bethesda — it must be quite a place. I hope they never get me there.” He came toward Ian, caught hold of him by the shoulder. “The police are shutting down all my jalopy jungles; I have to beat it to Mars and I’m taking you along with me. Try to pull yourself together; I’m Loony Luke — you don’t remember me now but you will after we’re all on Mars and you see your brother again. *Come on.”* Luke propelled him toward the gap in the wall of the room, where once had been a window, and toward the vehicle — it was called a jalopy, Ian realized — drifting beyond.

“Okay,” Ian said, wondering what he should take with him. What would he need on Mars? Toothbrush, pajamas, a heavy coat? He looked frantically around his apartment, one last look at it. Far off police sirens sounded.

Luke scrambled back into the jalopy, and Ian followed, taking hold of the elderly man’s extended hand. The floor of the jalopy crawled with bright orange bug-like creatures whose antennae waved at him. Papoolas, he remembered, or something like that.

You’ll be all right now, the papoolas were thinking. Don’t worry; Loony Luke got you away in time, just barely in time. Now just relax.

“Yes,” Ian said. He lay back against the side of the jalopy and relaxed; for the first time in many years he felt at peace.

The ship shot upward into the night emptiness and the new planet which lay beyond.

Waterspider

I

That morning, as he carefully shaved his head until it glistened, Aaron Tozzo pondered a vision too unfortunate to be endured. He saw in his mind fifteen convicts from Nachbaren Slager, each man only one inch high, in a ship the size of a child's balloon. The ship, traveling at almost the speed of light, continued on forever, with the men aboard neither knowing nor caring what became of them.

The worst part of the vision was just that in all probability it was true.

He dried his head, rubbed oil into his skin, then touched the button within his throat. When contact with the Bureau switchboard had been established, Tozzo said, "I admit we can do nothing to get those fifteen men back, but at least we can refuse to send any more."

His comment, recorded by the switchboard, was passed on to his co-workers. They all agreed; he listened to their voices chiming in as he put on his smock, slippers and overcoat. Obviously, the flight had been an error; even the public knew that now. But —

"But we're going on," Edwin Fermeti, Tozzo's superior, said above the clamor. "We've already got the volunteers."

"Also from Nachbaren Slager?" Tozzo asked. Naturally the prisoners there would volunteer; their lifespan at the camp was no more than five or six years. And if this flight to Proxima were successful, the men aboard would obtain their freedom. They would not have to return to any of the five inhabited planets within the Sol System.

"Why does it matter where they originate?" Fermeti said smoothly.

Tozzo said, “Our effort should be directed toward improving the U.S. Department of Penology, instead of trying to reach other stars.” He had a sudden urge to resign his position with the Emigration Bureau and go into politics as a reform candidate.

Later, as he sat at the breakfast table, his wife patted him sympathetically on the arm. “Aaron, you haven’t been able to solve it yet, have you?”

“No,” he admitted shortly. “And now I don’t even care.” He did not tell her about the other ship loads of convicts which had fruitlessly been expended; it was forbidden to discuss that with anyone not employed by a department of the Government.

“Could they be reentering on their own?”

“No. Because mass was lost here, in the Sol System. To reenter they have to obtain equal mass back, to replace it. That’s the whole point.” Exasperated, he sipped his tea and ignored her. Women, he thought. Attractive but not bright. “They need mass back,” he repeated. “Which would be fine if they were making a round trip, I suppose. But this is an attempt to colonize; it’s not a guided tour that returns to its point of origin.”

“How long does it take them to reach Proxima?” Leonore asked. “All reduced like that, to an inch high.”

“About four years.”

Her eyes grew large. “That’s marvelous.”

Grumbling at her, Tozzo pushed his chair back from the table and rose. I wish they’d take her, he said to himself, since she imagines it’s so marvelous. But Leonore would be too smart to volunteer.

Leonore said softly, “Then I was right. The Bureau *has* sent people. You as much as admitted it just now.”

Flushing, Tozzo said, “Don’t tell anybody; none of your female friends especially. Or it’s my job.” He glared at her.

On that hostile note, he set off for the Bureau.

As Tozzo unlocked his office door, Edwin Fermeti hailed him. “You think Donald Nils is somewhere on a planet circling Proxima at this very moment?” Nils was a notorious murderer who had volunteered for one of the Bureau’s flights. “I wonder — maybe he’s carrying around a lump of sugar five times his size.”

“Not really very funny,” Tozzo said.

Fermeti shrugged. “Just hoping to relieve the pessimism. I think we’re all getting discouraged.” He followed Tozzo into his office. “Maybe we should volunteer ourselves for the next flight.” It sounded almost as if he meant it, and Tozzo glanced quickly at him. “Joke,” Fermeti said.

“One more flight,” Tozzo said, “and if it fails, I resign.”

“I’ll tell you something,” Fermeti said. “We have a new tack.” Now Tozzo’s co-worker Craig Gilly had come sauntering up. To the two men, Fermeti said, “We’re going to try using precogs in obtaining our formula for re-entry.” His eyes flickered as he saw their reaction.

Astonished, Gilly said, “But all the precogs are dead. Destroyed by Presidential order twenty years ago.”

Tozzo, impressed, said, “He’s going to dip back into the past to obtain a pre-cog. Isn’t that right, Fermeti?”

“We will, yes,” his superior said, nodding. “Back to the golden age of precognition. The twentieth century.”

For a moment Tozzo was puzzled. And then he remembered. During the first half of the twentieth century so many precogs — people with the ability to read the future — had come into existence that an organized guild had been formed with branches in Los Angeles, New York, San Francisco and Pennsylvania. This group of precogs, all knowing one another, had put out a number of periodicals which had flourished for several decades. Boldly and openly, the members of the pre-cog guild had proclaimed in their writings their knowledge of the future. And yet — as a whole, their society had paid little attention to them.

Tozzo said slowly, “Let me get this straight. You mean you’re going to make use of the Department of Archaeology’s time-dredges to scoop up a famous pre-cog of the past?”

Nodding, Fermeti said, “And bring him here to help us, yes.”

“But how can he help us? He would have no knowledge of our future, only of his own.”

Fermeti said, “The Library of Congress has already given us access to its virtually complete collection of pre-cog journals of the twentieth century.” He smiled crookedly at Tozzo and Gilly, obviously enjoying the situation. “It’s my hope — and my expectation — that among this great body of writings we will find an article *specifically dealing with our re-entry problem.* The chances, statistically speaking, are quite good … they wrote about innumerable topics of future civilization, as you know.”

After a pause, Gilly said, “Very clever. I think your idea may solve our problem. Speed-of-light travel to other star systems may yet become a possibility.”

Sourly, Tozzo said, “Hopefully, before we run out of convicts.” But he, too, liked his superior’s idea. And, in addition, he looked forward to seeing face to face one of the famous twentieth century precogs. Theirs had been one brief, glorious period — sadly, long since ended.

Or not so brief, if one dated it as starting with Jonathan Swift, rather than with H. G. Wells. Swift had written of the two moons of Mars and their unusual orbital characteristics years before telescopes had proved their existence. And so today there was a tendency in the textbooks to include him.

II

It took the computers at the Library of Congress only a short while to scan the brittle, yellowed volumes, article by article, and to select the sole contribution dealing with deprivation of mass and restoration as the modus operandi of interstellar space travel. Einstein's formula that as an object increased its velocity its mass increased proportionally had been so fully accepted, so completely unquestioned, that no one in the twentieth century had paid any attention to the particular article, which had been put in print in August of 1955 in a pre-cog journal called *If.*

In Fermeti's office, Tozzo sat beside his superior as the two of them pored over the photographic reproduction of the journal. The article was titled *Night Flight,* and it ran only a few thousand words. Both men read it avidly, neither speaking until they had finished.

"Well?" Fermeti said, when they had come to the end.

Tozzo said, "No doubt of it. That's our Project, all right. A lot is garbled; for instance he calls the Emigration Bureau 'Outward, Incorporated,' and believes it to be a private commercial firm." He referred to the text. "It's really uncanny, though. You're obviously this character, Edmond Fletcher; the names are similar but still a little off, as is everything else. And I'm Alison Torelli." He shook his head admiringly. "Those precogs … having a mental image of the future that was always askew and yet in the main —"

"In the main correct," Fermeti finished. "Yes, I agree. This *Night Flight* article definitely deals with us and the Bureau's Project… herein called *Waterspider,* because it has to be done in one great leap. Good lord, that would have been a perfect name, had we thought of it. Maybe we can still call it that."

Tozzo said slowly, “But the pre-cog who wrote *Night Flight*… in no place does he actually give the formula for mass-restoration or even for mass-deprivation. He just simply says that ‘we have it.’ ” Taking the reproduction of the journal, he read aloud from the article:

Difficulty in restoring mass to the ship and its passengers at the termination of the flight had proved a stumbling block for Torelli and his team of researchers and yet they had at last proved successful. After the fateful implosion of the *Sea Scout,* the initial ship to —

“And that’s all,” Tozzo said. “So what good does it do us? Yes, this pre-cog experienced our present situation a hundred years ago — *but he left out the technical details.”*

There was silence.

At last Fermeti said thoughtfully, “That doesn’t mean he didn’t *know* the technical data. We know today that the others in his guild were very often trained scientists.” He examined the biographical report. “Yes, while not actually using his pre-cog ability he worked as a chicken-fat analyst for the University of California.”

“Do you still intend to use the time-dredge to bring him up to the present?”

Fermeti nodded. “I only wish the dredge worked both ways. If it could be used with the future, not the past, we could avoid having to jeopardize the safety of this pre-cog —” He glanced down at the article. “This Poul Anderson.”

Chilled, Tozzo said, “What hazard is there?”

“We may not be able to return him to his own time. Or —” Fermeti paused. “We might lose part of him along the way, wind up with only half of him. The dredge has bisected many objects before.”

“And this man isn’t a convict at Nachbaren Slager,” Tozzo said. “So you don’t have that rationale to fall back on.”

Fermeti said suddenly, “We’ll do it properly. We’ll reduce the jeopardy by sending a team of men back to that time, back to 1954. They can apprehend this Poul Anderson and see that *all of him* gets into the time-dredge, not merely the top half or the left side.”

So it had been decided. The Department of Archaeology’s time-dredge would go back to the world of 1954 and pick up the pre-cog Poul Anderson; there was nothing further to discuss.

Research conducted by the U.S. Department of Archaeology showed that in September of 1954 Poul Anderson had been living in Berkeley, California, on Grove Street. In that month he had attended a top-level meeting of precogs from all over the United States at the Sir Francis Drake Hotel in San Francisco. It was probable that there, in that meeting, basic policy for the next year had been worked out, with Anderson, and other experts, participating.

“It’s really very simple,” Fermeti explained to Tozzo and Gilly. “A pair of men will go back. They will be provided with forged identification showing them to be part of the nation-wide pre-cog organization… squares of cellophane-enclosed paper which are pinned to the coat lapel. Naturally, they will be wearing twentieth century garments. They will locate Poul Anderson, single him out and draw him off to one side.”

“And tell him what?” Tozzo said skeptically.

“That they represent an unlicensed amateur pre-cog organization in Battlecreek, Michigan, and that they have constructed an amusing vehicle built to resemble a time-travel dredge of the future. They will ask Mr. Anderson, who was actually quite famous in his time, to pose by their humbug dredge, and then they will ask for a shot of him within. Our research shows that, according to his contemporaries, Anderson was mild and easy-going, and also that at these yearly top-strategy assemblies he

often became convivial enough to enter into the mood of optimism generated by his fellow precogs."

Tozzo said, "You mean he sniffed what they called 'airplane dope'? He was a 'glue-sniffer'?"

With a faint smile, Fermeti said, "Hardly. That was a mania among adolescents and did not become widespread in fact until a decade later. No, I am speaking about imbibing alcohol."

"I see," Tozzo said, nodding.

Fermeti continued, "In the area of difficulties, we must cope with the fact that at this top-secret session, Anderson brought along his wife Karen, dressed as a Maid of Venus in gleaming breast-cups, short skirt and helmet, and that he also brought their newborn daughter Astrid. Anderson himself did not wear any disguise for purposes of concealing his identity. He had no anxieties, being a quite stable person, as were most twentieth century precogs.

"However, during the discussion periods between formal sessions, the precogs, minus their wives, circulating about, playing poker and arguing, some of them it is said stoning one another —"

"Stoning?"

"Or, as it was put, becoming stoned. In any case, they gathered in small groups in the antechambers of the hotel, and it is at such an occasion that we expect to nab him. In the general hubbub his disappearance would not be noted. We would expect to return him to that exact time, or at least no more than a few hours later or earlier… preferably not earlier because *two* Poul Andersons at the meeting might prove awkward."

Tozzo, impressed, said, "Sounds foolproof."

“I’m glad you like it,” Fermeti said tartly, “because you will be one of the team sent.”

Pleased, Tozzo said, “Then I had better get started learning the details of life in the mid twentieth century.” He picked up another issue of *If*. This one, May of 1971, had interested him as soon as he had seen it. Of course, this issue would not be known yet to the people of 1954 … but eventually they would see it. And once having seen it they would never forget it…

Ray Bradbury’s first textbook to be serialized, he realized as he examined the journal. *The Fisher of Men*, it was called, and in it the great Los Angeles pre-cog had anticipated the ghastly Gutmanist political revolution which was to sweep the inner planets. Bradbury had warned against Gutman, but the warning had gone — of course — unheeded. Now Gutman was dead and the fanatical supporters had dwindled to the status of random terrorists. But had the world listened to Bradbury —

“Why the frown?” Fermeti asked him. “Don’t you want to go?”

“Yes,” Tozzo said thoughtfully. “But it’s a terrible responsibility. These are no ordinary men.”

“That is certainly the truth,” Fermeti said, nodding.

III

Twenty-four hours later, Aaron Tozzo stood surveying himself in his mid twentieth century clothing and wondering if Anderson would be deceived, if he actually could be duped into entering the dredge.

The costume certainly was perfection itself. Tozzo had even been equipped with the customary waist-length beard and handlebar mustache so popular circa 1950 in the United States. And he wore a wig.

Wigs, as everyone knew, had at that time swept the United States as the fashion note par excellence; men and women had both worn huge powdered perukes of bright colors, reds and greens and blues and of course dignified grays. It was one of the most amusing occurrences of the twentieth century.

Tozzo’s wig, a bright red, pleased him. Authentic, it had come from the Los Angeles Museum of Cultural History, and the curator had vouched for it being a man’s, not a woman’s. So the fewest possible chances of detection were being taken. Little risk existed that they would be detected as members of another, future culture entirely.

And yet, Tozzo was still uneasy.

However, the plan had been arranged; now it was time to go. With Gilly, the other member selected, Tozzo entered the time-dredge and seated himself at the controls. The Department of Archaeology had provided a full instruction manual, which lay open before him. As soon as Gilly had locked the hatch, Tozzo took the bull by the horns (a twentieth century expression) and started up the dredge.

Dials registered. They were spinning backward into time, back to 1954 and the San Francisco Pre-Cog Congress.

Beside him, Gilly practiced mid twentieth century phrases from a reference volume. “Diz muz be da blace…” Gilly cleared his throat. “Kilroy was here,” he murmured. “Wha’ hoppen? Like man, let’s cut out; this ball’s a drag.” He shook his head. “I can’t grasp the exact sense of these phrases,” he apologized to Tozzo. “Twenty-three skidoo.”

Now a red light glowed; the dredge was about to conclude its journey. A moment later its turbines halted.

They had come to rest on the sidewalk outside the Sir Francis Drake Hotel in downtown San Francisco.

On all sides, people in quaint archaic costumes dragged along on foot. And, Tozzo saw, there were no monorails; all the visible traffic was surface-bound. What a congestion, he thought, as he watched the automobiles and buses moving inch by inch along the packed streets. An official in blue waved traffic ahead as best he could, but the entire enterprise, Tozzo could see, was an abysmal failure.

“Time for phase two,” Gilly said. But he, too, was gaping at the stalled surface vehicles. “Good grief,” he said, “look at the incredibly short skirts of the women; why, the knees are virtually exposed. Why don’t the women die of whisk virus?”

“I don’t know,” Tozzo said, “but I do know we’ve got to get into the Sir Francis Drake Hotel.”

Carefully, they opened the port of the time-dredge and stepped out. And then Tozzo realized something. There had been an error. Already.

The men of this decade were clean-shaven.

“Gilly,” he said rapidly, “we’ve got to shed our beards and mustaches.” In an instant he had pulled Gilly’s off, leaving his bare face exposed. But the wig; that was correct. All the men visible wore head-dress of some type;

Tozzo saw few if any bald men. The women, too, had luxurious wigs … or were they wigs? Could they perhaps be *natural* hair?

In any case, both he and Gilly now would pass. Into the Sir Francis Drake, he said to himself, leading Gilly along.

They darted lithely across the sidewalk — it was amazing how slowly the people of this time-period walked — and into the inexpressibly old-fashioned lobby of the hotel. Like a museum, Tozzo thought as he glanced about him. I wish we could linger… but they could not.

“How’s our identification?” Gilly said nervously. “Is it passing inspection?” The business with the facehair had upset him.

On each of their lapels they carried the expertly made false identification. It worked. Presently they found themselves ascending by a lift, or rather elevator, to the correct floor.

The elevator let them off in a crowded foyer. Men, all clean-shaven, with wigs or natural hair, stood in small clusters everywhere, laughing and talking. And a number of attractive women, some of them in garments called leotards, which were skin-tight, loitered about smilingly. Even though the styles of the times required their breasts to be covered, they were a sight to see.

Sotto voce, Gilly said, “I am stunned. In this room are some of the —”

“I know,” Tozzo murmured. Their Project could wait, at least a little while. Here was an unbelievably golden opportunity to see these precogs, actually to talk to them and listen to them…

Here came a tall, handsome man in a dark suit that sparkled with tiny specks of some unnatural material, some variety of synthetic. The man wore glasses and his hair, everything about him, had a tanned, dark look. The name on his identification … Tozzo peered.

The tall, good-looking man was A. E. van Vogt.

"Say," another individual, perhaps a pre-cog enthusiast, was saying to van Vogt, stopping him. "I read both versions of your *World of Null A* and I still didn't quite get that about it being *him;* you know, at the end. Could you explain that part to me? And also when they started into the tree and then just —" van Vogt halted. A soft smile appeared on his face and he said. "Well, I'll tell you a secret. I start out with a plot and then the plot sort of folds up. So then I have to have another plot to finish the rest of the story."

Going over to listen, Tozzo felt something magnetic about van Vogt. He was so tall, so spiritual. Yes, Tozzo said to himself; that was the word, a healing spirituality. There was a quality of innate goodness which emanated from him.

All at once van Vogt said, "There goes a man with my pants." And without a further word to the enthusiast, stalked off and disappeared into the crowd.

Tozzo's head swam. To actually have seen and heard A. E. van Vogt —

"Look," Gilly was saying, plucking at his sleeve. "That enormous, genial-looking man seated over there; that's Howard Browne, who edited the pre-cog journal *Amazing* at this time-period."

"I have to catch a plane," Howard Browne was saying to anyone who would listen to him. He glanced about him in a worried anxiety, despite his almost physical geniality.

"I wonder," Gilly said, "if Doctor Asimov is here."

We can ask, Tozzo decided. He made his way over to one of the young women wearing a blonde wig and green leotards. "WHERE IS DOCTOR ASIMOV?" he asked clearly in the argot of the times.

“Who’s to know?” the girl said.

“Is he here, miss?”

“Naw,” the girl said.

Gilly again plucked at Tozzo’s sleeve. “We must find Poul Anderson, remember? Enjoyable as it is to talk to this girl —”

“I’m inquiring about Asimov,” Tozzo said brusquely. After all, Isaac Asimov had been the founder of the entire twenty-first century positronic robot industry. How could he not be here?

A burly outdoorish man strode by them, and Tozzo saw that this was Jack Vance. Vance, he decided, looked more like a big game hunter than anything else … we must beware of him, Tozzo decided. If we got into any altercation Vance could take care of us easily.

He noticed now that Gilly was talking to the blonde-wigged girl in the green leotards. “MURRAY LEINSTER?” Gilly was asking. “The man whose paper on parallel time is still at the very forefront of theoretical studies; isn’t he —”

“I dunno,” the girl said, in a bored tone of voice.

A group had gathered about a figure opposite them; the central person whom everybody was listening to was saying, “…all right, if like Howard Browne you prefer air travel, fine. But I say it’s risky. I don’t fly. In fact even riding in a car is dangerous. I generally lie down in the back.” The man wore a short-cropped wig and a bow tie; he had a round, pleasant face but his eyes were intense.

It was Ray Bradbury, and Tozzo started toward him at once.

“Stop!” Gilly whispered angrily. “Remember what we came for.”

And, past Bradbury, seated at the bar, Tozzo saw an older, care-weathered man in a brown suit wearing small glasses and sipping a drink. He recognized the man from drawings in early Gernsback publications; it was the fabulously unique pre-cog from the New Mexico region, Jack Williamson.

"I thought *Legion of Time was* the finest novel-length science-fiction work I ever read," an individual, evidently another pre-cog enthusiast, was saying to Jack Williamson, and Williamson was nodding in pleasure.

"That was originally going to be a short story," Williamson said. "But it grew. Yes, I like that one, too."

Meanwhile Gilly had wandered on, into an adjoining room. He found, at a table, two women and a man in deep conversation. One of the women, dark-haired and handsome, with bare shoulders, was — according to her identification plate — Evelyn Paige. The taller woman he discovered was the renowned Margaret St. Clair, and Gilly at once said:

"Mrs. St. Clair, your article entitled *The Scarlet Hexapodin* the September 1959 was one of the finest —" And then he broke off.

Because Margaret St. Clair had not written that yet. Knew in fact nothing about it. Flushing with nervousness, Gilly backed away.

"Sorry," he murmured. "Excuse me; I became confused."

Raising an eyebrow, Margaret St. Clair said, "In the September 1959 issue, you say? What are you, a man from the future?"

"Droll," Evelyn Paige said, "but let's continue." She gave Gilly a hard stare from her black eyes. "Now Bob, as I understand what you're saying —" She addressed the man opposite her, and Gilly saw now to his delight that the dire-looking cadaverous individual was none other than Robert Bloch.

Gilly said, “Mr. Bloch, your article in *Galaxy: Sabbatical,* was —”

“You’ve got the wrong person, my friend,” Robert Bloch said. “I never wrote any piece entitled *Sabbatical.”*

Good Lord, Gilly realized. I did it again; *Sabbatical is* another work which has not been written yet. I had better get away from here. He moved back toward Tozzo… and found him standing rigidly.

Tozzo said, “I’ve found Anderson.”

At once, Gilly turned, also rigid.

Both of them had carefully studied the pictures provide by the Library of Congress. There stood the famous pre-cog, tall and slender and straight, even a trifle thin, with curly hair — or wig — and glasses, a warm glint of friendliness in his eyes. He held a whiskey glass in one hand, and he was discoursing with several other precogs. Obviously he was enjoying himself.

“Urn, uh, let’s see,” Anderson was saying, as Tozzo and Gilly came quietly up to join the group. “Pardon?” Anderson cupped his ear to catch what one of the other precogs was saying. “Oh, uh, yup, that’s right.” Anderson nodded. “Yup, Tony, uh, I agree with you one hundred per cent.”

The other pre-cog, Tozzo realized, was the superb Tony Boucher, whose precognition of the religious revival of the next century had been almost supernatural. The word-by-word description of the Miracle in the Cave involving the robot… Tozzo gazed at Boucher with awe, and then he turned back to Anderson.

“Poul,” another pre-cog said. “I’ll tell you how the Italians intended to get the British to leave if they did invade in 1943. The British would stay at hotels, the best, naturally. The Italians would overcharge them.”

“Oh, yes, yes,” Anderson said, nodding and smiling, his eyes twinkling. “And then the British, being gentlemen, would say nothing —”

“But they’d leave the next day,” the other pre-cog finished, and all in the group laughed, except for Gilly and Tozzo.

“Mr. Anderson,” Tozzo said tensely, “we’re from an amateur pre-cog organization at Battlecreek, Michigan and we would like to photograph you beside our model of a time-dredge.”

“Pardon?” Anderson said, cupping his ear.

Tozzo repeated what he had said, trying to be audible above the background racket. At last Anderson seemed to understand.

“Oh, um, well, where is it?” Anderson asked obligingly.

“Downstairs on the sidewalk,” Gilly said. “It was too heavy to bring up.”

“Well, uh, if it won’t take too awfully long,” Anderson said, “which I doubt it will.” He excused himself from the group and followed after them as they started toward the elevator.

“It’s steam-engine building time,” a heavyset man called to them as they passed. “Time to build steam engines, Poul.”

“We’re going downstairs,” Tozzo said nervously.

“Walk downstairs on your heads,” the pre-cog said. He waved goodbye goodnaturedly, as the elevator came and the three of them entered it.

“Kris is jolly today,” Anderson said.

“And how,” Gilly said, using one of his phrases.

“Is Bob Heinlein here?” Anderson asked Tozzo as they descended. “I understand he and Mildred Clingerman went off somewhere to talk about cats and nobody has seen them come back.”

“That’s the way the ball bounces,” Gilly said, trying out another twentieth century phrase.

Anderson cupped his ear, smiled hesitantly, but said nothing.

At last, they emerged on the sidewalk. At the sight of their time-dredge, Anderson blinked in astonishment.

“I’ll be gosh darned,” he said, approaching it. “That’s certainly imposing. Sure, I’d, uh, be happy to pose beside it.” He drew his lean, angular body erect, smiling that warm, almost tender smile that *Tozzo* had noticed before. “Uh, how’s this?” Anderson inquired, a little timidly.

With an authentic twentieth century camera taken from the Smithsonian, Gilly snapped a picture. “Now inside,” he requested, and glanced at Tozzo.

“Why, uh, certainly,” Poul Anderson said, and stepped up the stairs and into the dredge. “Gosh, Karen would, uh, like this,” he said as he disappeared inside. “I wish to heck she’d come along.”

Tozzo followed swiftly. Gilly slammed the hatch shut, and, at the control board, Tozzo, with the instruction manual in hand, punched buttons.

The turbines hummed, but Anderson did not seem to hear them; he was engrossed in staring at the controls, his eyes wide.

“Gosh,” he said.

The time-dredge passed back to the present, with Anderson still lost in his scrutiny of the controls.

IV

Fermeti met them. “Mr. Anderson,” he said, “this is an incredible honor.” He held out his hand, but now Anderson was peering through the open hatch past him, at the city beyond; he did not notice the offered hand.

“Say,” Anderson said, his face twitching. “Um, what’s, uh, this?”

He was staring at the monorail system primarily, Tozzo decided. And this was odd, because at least in Seattle there had been monorails back in Anderson’s time… or had there been? Had that come later? In any case, Anderson now wore a massively perplexed expression.

“Individual cars,” Tozzo said, standing close beside him. “Your monorails had only group cars. Later on, after your time, it was made possible for each citizen’s house to have a monorail outlet; the individual brought his car out of its garage and onto the rail-terminal, from which point he joined the collective structure. Do you see?”

But Anderson remained perplexed; his expression in fact had deepened.

“Um,” he said, “what do you mean ‘my time’? Am I dead?” He looked morose now. “I thought it would be more along the lines of Valhalla, with Vikings and such. Not futuristic.”

“You’re not dead, Mr. Anderson,” Fermeti said. “What you’re facing is the culture-syndrome of the mid twenty-first century. I must tell you, sir, that you’ve been napped. But you will be returned; I give you both my personal and official word.”

Andersen’s jaw dropped, but he said nothing; he continued to stare.

Donald Nils, notorious murderer, sat at the single table in the reference room of the Emigration Bureau's interstellar speed-of-light ship and computed that he was, in Earth figures, an inch high. Bitterly, he cursed. "It's cruel and unusual punishment," he grated aloud. "It's against the Constitution." And then he remembered that he had volunteered, in order to get out of Nachbaren Slager. That goddam hole, he said to himself. Anyhow, I'm out of there.

And, he said to himself, even if I'm only an inch high I've still made myself captain of this lousy ship, and if it ever gets to Proxima I'll be captain of the entire lousy Proxima System. I didn't study with Gutman himself for nothing. And if that don't beat Nachbaren Slager, I don't know what does…

His second-in-command, Pete Bailly, stuck his head into the reference room. "Hey, Nils, I have been looking over the micro-repro of this particular old pre-cog journal *Astounding* like you told me, this Venus Equilateral article about matter transmission, and I mean even though I was the top vid repairman in New York City that don't mean I can build one of *these* things." He glared at Nils. "That's asking a lot."

Nils said tightly, "We've got to get back to Earth."

"You're out of luck," Bailly told him. "Better settle for Prox."

Furiously, Nils swept the micro-reproductions from the table, onto the floor of the ship. "That damn Bureau of Emigration! They tricked us!"

Bailly shrugged. "Anyhow we got plenty to eat and a good reference library and 3-D movies every night."

"By the time we get to Prox," Nils snarled, "we'll have seen every movie —" He calculated. "Two thousand times."

“Well, then don’t watch. Or we can run them backwards. How’s your research coming?”

“I got going the micro of an article in *Space Science Fiction”* Nils said thoughtfully, “called *The Variable Man.* It tells about faster-than-light transmission. You disappear and then reappear. Sonic guy named Cole is going to perfect it, according to the old-time pre-cog who wrote it.” He brooded about that. “If we could build a faster-than-light ship we could return to Earth. We could take over.”

“That’s crazy talk,” Bailly said.

Nils regarded him. “I’m in command.”

“Then,” Bailly said, “we got a nut in command. There’s no returning to Terra; we better build our lives on Proxima’s planets and forget forever about our home. Thank God we got women aboard. My God, even if we did get back… what could one-inch high people accomplish? We’d be jeered at.”

“Nobody jeers at me,” Nils said quietly.

But he knew Bailly was right. They’d be lucky if they could research the micros of the old pre-cog journals in the ship’s reference room and develop for themselves a way of landing safely on Proxima’s planets… even *that* was asking a lot.

We’ll succeed, Nils said to himself. As long as everyone obeys me, does exactly as I tell them, with no dumb questions.

Bending, he activated the spool of the December 1962 *If.* There was an article in it that particularly interested him … and he had four years ahead of him in which to read, understand, and finally apply it.

Fermeti said, “Surely your pre-cog ability helped prepare you for this, Mr. Anderson.” His voice faltered with nervous strain, despite his efforts to control it.

“How about taking me back now?” Anderson said. He sounded almost calm.

Fermeti, after shooting a swift glance at Tozzo and Gilly, said to Anderson, “We have a technical problem, you see. That’s why we brought you here to our own time-continuum. You see —”

“I think you had better, um, take me back,” Anderson broke in. “Karen’ll get worried.” He craned his neck, peering in all directions. “I knew it would be somewhat on this order,” he murmured. His face twitched. “Not too different from what I expected… what’s that tall thing over there? Looks like what the old blimps used to catch onto.”

“That,” Tozzo said, “is a prayer tower.”

“Our problem,” Fermeti said patiently, “is dealt with in your article *Night Flight* in the August 1955 *If*. We’ve been able to deprive an interstellar vehicle of its mass, but so far restoration of mass has —”

“Uh, oh, yes,” Anderson said, in a preoccupied way. “I’m working on that yarn right now. Should have that off to Scott in another couple of weeks.” He explained, “My agent.”

Fermeti considered a moment and then said, “Can you give us the formula for mass-restoration, Mr. Anderson?”

“Um,” Poul Anderson said slowly, “Yes, I guess that would be the correct term. Mass-restoration… I could go along with that.” He nodded. “I haven’t worked out any formula; I didn’t want to make the yarn too technical. I guess I could make one up, if that’s what they wanted.” He was

silent, then, apparently having withdrawn into a world of his own; the three men waited, but Anderson said nothing more.

“Your pre-cog ability,” Fermeti said.

“Pardon?” Anderson said, cupping his ear. “Pre-cog?” He smiled shyly. “Oh, uh, I wouldn’t go so far as to say that. I know John believes in all that, but I can’t say as I consider a few experiments at Duke University as proof.”

Fermeti stared at Anderson a long time. “Take the first article in the January 1953 *Galaxy”* he said quietly. “*The Defenders*… about the people living beneath the surface and the robots up above, pretending to fight the war but actually not, actually faking the reports so interestingly that the people —”

“I read that,” Poul Anderson agreed. “Very good, I thought, except for the ending. I didn’t care too much for the ending.”

Fermeti said, “You understand, don’t you, that those exact conditions came to pass in 1996, during World War Three? That by means of the article we were able to penetrate the deception carried on by our surface robots? That virtually every word of that article was exactly prophetic —”

“Phil Dick wrote that,” Anderson said. “*The Defenders?’*

“Do you know him?” Tozzo inquired.

“Met him yesterday at the Convention,” Anderson said. “For the first time. Very nervous fellow, was almost afraid to come in.”

Fermeti said, “Am I to understand that *none of you are aware that you are precogs?”* His voice shook, completely out of control now.

“Well,” Anderson said slowly, “some sf writers believe in it. I think Alf Van Vogt does,” He smiled at Fermeti.

“But don’t you understand?” Fermeti demanded. “You described *us* in an article — you accurately described our Bureau and its interstellar Project!”

After a pause, Anderson murmured, “Gosh, I’ll be darned. No, I didn’t know that. Um, thanks a lot for telling me.”

Turning to Tozzo, Fermeti said, “Obviously we’ll have to recast our entire concept of the mid twentieth century.” He looked weary.

Tozzo said, “For our purposes their ignorance doesn’t matter. Because the precognitive ability was there anyhow, whether they recognized it or not.” That, to him, was perfectly clear.

Anderson, meanwhile, had wandered off a little and stood now inspecting the display window of a nearby gift store. “Interesting bric-a-brac in there. I ought to pick up something for Karen while I’m here. Would it be all right —” He turned questioningly to Fermeti. “Could I step in there for a moment and look around?”

“Yes, yes,” Fermeti said irritably.

Poul Anderson disappeared inside the gift shop, leaving the three of them to argue the meaning of their discovery.

“What we’ve got to do,” Fermeti said, “is sit him down in the situation familiar to him: *before a typewriter.* We must persuade him to compose an article on deprivation of mass and its subsequent restoration. Whether he himself takes the article to be factual or not has no bearing; it still will be. The Smithsonian must have a workable twentieth century typewriter and 8 1/2 by 11 white sheets of paper. Do you agree?”

Tozzo, meditating, said, “I’ll tell you what I think. It was a cardinal error to permit him to go into that gift shop.”

“Why is that?” Fermeti said.

“I see his point,” Gilly said excitedly. “We’ll never see Anderson again; he’s skipped out on us through the pretext of gift-shopping for his wife.”

Ashen-faced, Fermeti turned and raced into the gift ship. Tozzo and Gilly followed.

The store was empty. Anderson had eluded them; he was gone.

As he loped silently out the back door of the gift shop, Poul Anderson thought to himself, I don’t believe they’ll get me. At least not right away. I’ve got too much to do while I’m here, he realized. What an opportunity! When I’m an old man I can tell Astrid’s children about this.

Thinking of his daughter Astrid reminded him of one very simple fact, however. Eventually he had to go back to 1954. Because of Karen and the baby. No matter what he found here — for him it was temporary.

But meanwhile… first I’ll go to the library, *any* library, he decided. And get a good look at history books that’ll tell me what took place in the intervening years between 1954 and now.

I’d like to know, he said to himself, about the Cold War, how the U.S. and Russia came out. And — space explorations. I’ll bet they put a man on Luna by 1975. Certainly, they’re exploring space now; heck, they even have a time-dredge so they must have *that.*

Ahead Poul Anderson saw a doorway. It was open and without hesitation he plunged into it. Another shop of some kind, but this one larger than the gift shop.

“Yes sir,” a voice said, and a bald-headed man — they all seemed to be bald-headed here — approached him. The man glanced at Anderson’s hair, his clothes… however the clerk was polite; he made no comment. “May I help you?” he asked.

“Um,” Anderson said, stalling. What did this place sell, anyhow? He glanced around. Gleaming electronic objects of some sort. But what did they do?

The clerk said, “Haven’t you been nuzzled lately, sir?”

“What’s that?” Anderson said. *Nuzzled?*

“The new spring nuzzlers have arrived, you know,” the clerk said, moving toward the gleaming spherical machine nearest him. “Yes,” he said to Poul, “you do strike me as very, very faintly introve — no offense meant, sir, I mean, it’s legal to be introved.” The clerk chuckled. “For instance, your rather odd clothing… made it yourself, I take it? I must say, sir, to make your own clothing is highly introve. Did you weave it?” The clerk grimaced as if tasting something bad.

“No,” Poul said, “as a matter of fact it’s my best suit.”

“Heh, heh,” the clerk said. “I share the joke, sir; quite witty. But what about your head? You haven’t shaved your head in *weeks.*”

“Nope,” Anderson admitted. “Well, maybe I do need a nuzzler.” Evidently everyone in this century had one; like a TV set in his own time, it was a necessity, in order for one to be part of the culture.

“How many in your family?” the clerk said. Bringing out a measuring tape, he measured the length of Poul’s sleeve.

“Three,” Poul answered, baffled.

“How old is the youngest?”

“Just born,” Poul said.

The clerk’s face lost all its color. “Get out of here,” he said quietly. “Before I call for the polpol.”

“Um, what’s that? Pardon?” Poul said, cupping his ear and trying to hear, not certain he had understood.

“You’re a criminal,” the clerk mumbled. “You ought to be in Nachbaren Slager.”

“Well, thanks anyhow,” Poul said, and backed out of the store, onto the sidewalk; his last glimpse was of the clerk still staring at him.

“Are you a foreigner?” a voice asked, a woman’s voice. At the curb she had halted her vehicle. It looked to Poul like a bed; in fact, he realized, it was a bed. The woman regarded him with astute calm, her eyes dark and intense. Although her glistening shaved head somewhat upset him, he could see that she was attractive.

“I’m from another culture,” Poul said, finding himself unable to keep his eyes from her figure. Did all the women dress like this here in this society? Bare shoulders, he could understand. But not —

And the bed. The combination of the two was too much for him. What kind of business was she in, anyhow? And in public. What a society this was… morals had changed since his own time.

“I’m looking for the library,” Poul said, not coming too close to the vehicle which was a bed with motor and wheels, a tiller for steering.

The woman said, “The library is one bight from here.”

“Um,” Poul said, “what’s a ‘bight’?”

“Obviously, you’re wanging me,” the woman said. All visible parts of her flushed a dark red. “It’s not funny. Any more than your disgustingly hairy head is. Really, both your wanging and your head are not amusing, at least not to me.” And yet she did not go on; she remained where she was, regarding him somberly. “Perhaps you need help,” she decided. “Perhaps I should pity you. You know of course that the polpol could pick you up any time they want.”

Poul said, “Could I, um, buy you a cup of coffee somewhere and we could talk? I’m really anxious to find the library.”

“I’ll go with you,” the woman agreed. “Although I have no idea what ‘coffee’ is. If you touch me I’ll nilp at once.”

“Don’t do that,” Poul said, “it’s unnecessary; all I want to do is look up some historical material.” And then it occurred to him that he could make good use of any technical data he could get his hands on.

What one volume might he smuggle back to 1954 which would be of great value? He racked his brains. An almanac. A dictionary… a school text on science which surveyed all the fields for laymen; yes, that would do it. A seventh grade text or a high school text. He could rip the covers off, throw them away, put the pages inside his coat.

Poul said, “Where’s a school? The closest school.” He felt the urgency of it, now. He had no doubt that they were after him, close behind.

“What is a ‘school’?” the woman asked.

“Where your children go,” Poul said.

The woman said quietly, “You poor sick man.”

V

For a time Tozzo and Fermeti and Gilly stood in silence. And then Tozzo said in a carefully controlled voice, “You know what’s going to happen to him, of course. Polpol will pick him up and mono-express him to Nachbaren Slager. Because of his appearance. He may even be there already.”

Fermeti sprinted at once for the nearest vidphone. “I’m going to contact the authorities at Nachbaren Slager. I’ll talk to Potter; we can trust him, I think.”

Presently Major Potter’s heavy, dark features formed on the vidscreen. “Oh, hello, Fermeti. You want more convicts, do you?” He chuckled. “You use them up even faster than we do.”

Behind Potter, Fermeti caught a glimpse of the open recreation area of the giant internment camp. Criminals, both political and nonpol, could be seen roaming about, stretching their legs, some of them playing dull, pointless games which, he knew, went on and on, sometimes for months, each time they were out of their work-cells.

“What we want,” Fermeti said, “is to prevent an individual being brought to you at all.” He described Poul Anderson. “If he’s monoed there, call me at once. And don’t harm him. You understand? We want him back safe.”

“Sure,” Potter said easily. “Just a minute; I’ll have a scan put on our new admissions.” He touched a button to his right and a 315 -R computer came on; Fermeti heard its low hum. Potter touched buttons and then said, “This’ll pick him out if he’s monoed here. Our admissions-circuit is prepared to reject him.”

“No sign yet?” Fermeti asked tensely.

“Nope,” Potter said, and purposefully yawned.

Fermeti broke the connection.

“Now what?” Tozzo said. “We could possibly trace him by means of a Ganymedean sniffer-sponge.” They were a repellent life form, though; if one managed to find its quarry it fastened at once to its blood system leech-wise. “Or do it mechanically,” he added. “With a detec beam. We have a print of Anderson’s EEG pattern, don’t we? But that would really bring in the polpol.” The detec beam by law belonged only to the polpol; after all, it was the artifact which had, at last, tracked down Gutman himself.

Fermeti said bluntly, “I’m for broadcasting a planetwide Type II alert. That’ll activate the citizenry, the average informer. They’ll know there’s an automatic reward for any Type II found.”

“But he could be manhandled that way,” Gilly pointed out. “By a mob. Let’s think this through.”

After a pause Tozzo said, “How about trying it from a purely cerebral standpoint? If you had been transported from the mid twentieth century to our continuum, what would you want to do? *Where would you go?”*

Quietly, Fermeti said, “To the nearest spaceport, of course. To buy a ticket to Mars or the outplanets — routine in our age but utterly out of the question at mid twentieth century.” They looked at one another.

“But Anderson doesn’t know where the spaceport is,” Gilly said. “It’ll take him valuable time to orient himself. We can go there directly by express subsurface mono.”

A moment later the three Bureau of Emigration men were on their way. “A fascinating situation,” Gilly said, as they rode along, jiggling up and down, facing one another in the monorail first-class compartment. “We totally misjudged the mid twentieth century mind; it should be a lesson to us. Once we’ve regained possession of Anderson we should make further inquiries. For instance, the Poltergeist Effect. What was their interpretation of it? And table-tapping — did they recognize it for what it was? Or did they merely consign it to the realm of the so-called ‘occult’ and let it go at that?”

“Anderson may hold the clue to these questions and many others,” Fermeti said. “But our central problem remains the same. We must induce him to complete the mass-restoration formula in precise mathematical terms, rather than vague, poetic allusions.”

Thoughtfully, Tozzo said, “He’s a brilliant man, that Anderson. Look at the ease by which he eluded us.”

“Yes,” Fermeti agreed. “We mustn’t underestimate him. We did that, and it’s rebounded.” His face was grim.

Hurrying up the almost-deserted sidestreet, Poul Anderson wondered why the woman had regarded him as sick. And the mention of children had set off the clerk in the store, too. Was birth illegal now? Or was it regarded as sex had been once, as something too private to speak of in public?

In any case, he realized, if I plan to stay here I’ve got to shave my head. And, if possible, acquire different clothing.

There must be barbershops. And, he thought, the coins in my pockets; they’re probably worth a lot to collectors.

He glanced about, hopefully. But all he saw were tall, luminous plastic and metal buildings which made up the city, structures in which incomprehensible transactions took place. They were as alien to him as —

Alien, he thought, and the word lodged chokingly in his mind. Because something had oozed from a doorway ahead of him. And now his way was blocked — deliberately, it seemed — by a slime mold, dark yellow in color, as large as a human being, palpitating visibly on the sidewalk. After a pause the slime mold undulated toward at him at a regular, slow rate. A human evolutionary development? Poul Anderson wondered, recoiling from it. Good Lord … and then he realized what he was seeing.

This era had space travel. He was seeing a creature from another planet.

"Um," Poul said, to the enormous mass of slime mold, "can I bother you a second to ask a question?"

The slime mold ceased to undulate forward. And in Poul's brain a thought formed which was not his own. "I catch your query. In answer: I arrived yesterday from Callisto. But I also catch a number of unusual and highly interesting thoughts in addition… you are a time traveler from the past." The tone of the creature's emanations was one of considerate, polite amusement — and interest.

"Yes," Poul said. "From 1954."

"And you wish to find a barbershop, a library and a school. All at once, in the precious time remaining before they capture you." The slime mold seemed solicitous. "What can I do to help you? I could absorb you, but it would be a permanent symbiosis, and you would not like that. You are thinking of your wife and child. Allow me to inform you as to the problem regarding your unfortunate mention of children. Terrans of this period are experiencing a mandatory moratorium on childbirth, because of the almost infinite sporting of the previous decades. There was a war, you see. Between Gutman's fanatical followers and the more liberal legions of General McKinley. The latter won."

Poul said, "Where should I go? I'm confused." His head throbbed and he felt tired. Too much had happened. Just a short while ago he had been standing with Tony Boucher in the Sir Francis Drake Hotel, drinking and

chatting… and now this. Facing this great slime mold from Callisto. It was difficult — to say the least — to make such an adjustment.

The slime mold was transmitting to him. “I am accepted here while you, their ancestor, are regarded as odd. Ironic. To me, you look quite like them, except for your curly brown hair and of course your silly clothing.” The creature from Callisto pondered. “My friend, the polpol are the political police, and they search for deviants, followers of the defeated Gutman, who are terrorists now, and hated. Many of these followers are drawn from the potentially criminal classes. That is, the non-conformists, the so-called introves. Individuals who set their own subjective value-system up in place of the objective system in vogue. It is a matter of life and death to the Terrans, since Gutman almost won.”

“I’m going to hide,” Poul decided.

“But where? You can’t really. Not unless you wish to go underground and join the Gutmanites, the criminal class of bomb-throwers… and you won’t want to do that. Let us stroll together, and if anyone challenges you, I will say you’re my servant. You have manual extensors and I have not. And I have, by a quirk, decided to dress you oddly and to have you retain your head-hair. The responsibility then becomes mine. It is actually not unusual for higher out-world organisms to employ Terran help.”

“Thanks,” Poul said tautly, as the slime mold resumed its slow forward motion along the sidewalk. “But there are things I want to do —”

“I am on my way to the zoo,” the slime mold continued. An unkind thought came to Poul.

“Please,” the slime mold said. “Your anachronistic twentieth century humor is not appreciated. I am not an inhabitant of the zoo; it is for life forms of low mental order such as Martian glebs and trawns. Since the initiation of interplanetary travel, zoos have become the center of —”

Poul said, “Could you lead me to the space terminal?” He tried to make his request sound casual.

“You take a dreadful risk,” the slime mold said, “in going to any public place. The polpol watch constantly.”

“I still want to go.” If he could board an interplanetary ship, if he could leave Earth, see other worlds —

But they would erase his memory; all at once he realized that, in a rush of horror. *I’ve got to make notes,* he told himself. At once!

“Do, um, you have a pencil?” he asked the slime mold. “Oh, wait; I have one. Pardon me.” Obviously the slime mold didn’t.

On a piece of paper from his coat pocket — it was convention material of some sort — he wrote hurriedly, in brief, disjointed phrases, what had happened to him, what he had seen in the twenty-first century. Then he quickly stuck the paper back in his pocket.

“A wise move,” the slime mold said. “And now to the spaceport, if you will accompany me at my slow pace. And, as we go, I will give you details of Terra’s history from your period on.” The slime mold moved down the sidewalk. Poul accompanied it eagerly; after all, what choice did he have? “The Soviet Union. That was tragic. Their war with Red China in 1983 which finally involved Israel and France… regrettable, but it did solve the problem of what to do with France — a most difficult nation to deal with in the latter half of the twentieth century.”

On his piece of paper Poul jotted that down, too.

“After France had been defeated —” The slime mold went on, as Poul scratched against time.

Fermeti said, “We must glin, if we’re to catch Anderson before he boards a ship.” And by “glin” he did not mean glinning a little; he meant a full search with the cooperation of the polpol. He hated to bring them in, and yet their help now seemed vital. Too much time had passed and Anderson had not yet been found.

The spaceport lay ahead, a great disk miles in diameter, with no vertical obstructions. In the center was the Burned Spot, seared by years of tail-exhausts from landing and departing ships. Fermeti liked the spaceport, because here the denseness of the close-packed buildings of the city abruptly ceased. Here was *openness*, such as he recalled from childhood… if one dared to think openly of childhood.

The terminal building was set hundreds of feet beneath the rexeroid layer built to protect the waiting people in case of an accident above. Fermeti reached the entrance of the descent ramp, then halted impatiently to wait for Tozzo and Gilly to catch up with him.

“I’ll nilp,” Tozzo said, but without enthusiasm. And he broke the band on his wrist with a single decisive motion.

The polpol ship hovered overhead at once.

“We’re from the Emigration Bureau,” Fermeti explained to the polpol lieutenant. He outlined their Project, described — reluctantly — their bringing Poul Anderson from his time-period to their own.

“Hair on head,” the polpol lieutenant nodded. “Quaint duds. Okay, Mr. Fermeti; we’ll glin until we find him.” He nodded, and his small ship shot off.

“They’re efficient,” Tozzo admitted.

“But not likeable,” Fermeti said, finishing Tozzo’s thought.

“They make me uncomfortable,” Tozzo agreed. “But I suppose they’re supposed to.”

The three of them stepped onto the descent ramp — and dropped at breathtaking speed to level one below. Fermeti shut his eyes, wincing at the loss of weight. It was almost as bad as takeoff itself. Why did everything have to be so rapid, these days? It certainly was not like the previous decade, when things had gone leisurely.

They stepped from the ramp, shook themselves, and were approached instantly by the building’s polpol chief.

“We have a report on your man,” the gray-uniformed officer told them.

“He hasn’t taken off?” Fermeti said. “Thank God.” He looked around.

“Over there,” the officer said, pointing.

At a magazine rack, Poul Anderson was looking intently at the display. It took only a moment for the three Emigration Bureau officials to surround him.

“Oh, uh, hello,” Anderson said. “While I was waiting for my ship I thought I’d take a look and see what’s still in print.”

Fermeti said, “Anderson, we require your unique abilities. I’m sorry, but we’re taking you back to the Bureau.”

All at once Anderson was gone. Soundlessly, he had ducked away; they saw his tall, angular form become smaller as he raced for the gate to the field proper.

Reluctantly, Fermeti reached within his coat and brought out a sleep-gun. “There’s no other choice,” he murmured, and squeezed.

The racing figure tumbled, rolled. Fermeti put the sleep-gun away and in a toneless voice said, “He’ll recover. A skinned knee, nothing worse.” He glanced at Gilly and Tozzo. “Recover at the Bureau, I mean.”

Together, the three of them advanced toward the prone figure on the floor of the spaceport waiting room.

“You may return to your own time-continuum,” Fermeti said quietly, “when you’ve given us the mass-restoration formula.” He nodded, and a Bureau workman approached, carrying the ancient Royal typewriter.

Seated in the chair across from Fermeti in the Bureau’s inner business office, Poul Anderson said, “I don’t use a portable.”

“You must cooperate,” Fermeti informed him. “We have the scientific know-how to restore you to Karen; remember Karen and remember your newly-born daughter at the Congress in San Francisco’s Sir Francis Drake Hotel. Without full cooperation from you, Anderson, there will be no cooperation from the Bureau. Surely, with your pre-cog ability you can see that.”

After a pause Anderson said, “Urn, I can’t work unless I have a pot of fresh coffee brewing around me at all times, somewhere.”

Curtly, Fermeti signaled. “We’ll obtain coffee beans for you,” he declared. “But the brewing is up to you. We’ll also supply a pot from the Smithsonian collection and there our responsibility ends.”

Taking hold of the carriage of the typewriter, Anderson began to inspect it. “Red and black ribbon,” he said. “I always use black. But I guess I can make do.” He seemed a trifle sullen. Inserting a sheet of paper, he began to type. At the top of the page appeared the words:

NIGHT FLIGHT

- Poul Anderson

“You say *If* bought it?” he asked Fermeti.

“Yes,” Fermeti replied tensely.

Anderson typed:

Difficulties at Outward, Incorporated had begun to nettle Edmond Fletcher. For one thing, an entire ship had disappeared, and although the individuals aboard were not personally known to him he felt a twinge of responsibility. Now, as he lathered himself with hormone-impregnated soap

“He starts at the beginning,” Fermeti said bitingly. “Well, if there’s no alternative we’ll simply have to bear with him.” Musingly, he murmured, “I wonder how long it takes… I wonder how fast he writes. As a pre-cog he can see what’s coming next; it should help him to do it in a hurry.” Or was that just wishful thinking?

“Have the coffee beans arrived yet?” Anderson asked, glancing up.

“Any time now,” Fermeti said.

“I hope some of the beans are Colombian,” Anderson said.

Long before the beans arrived the article was done.

Rising stiffly, uncoiling his lengthy limbs, Poul Anderson said, “I think you have what you want, there. The mass restoration formula is on typescript page 20.”

Eagerly, Fermeti turned the pages. Yes, there it was; peering over his shoulder, Tozzo saw the paragraph:

If the ship followed a trajectory which would carry it into the star Proxima, it would, he realized, regain its mass through a process of leeching

solar energy from the great star-furnace itself. Yes, it was Proxima itself which held the key to Torelli's problem, and now, after all this time, it had been solved. The simple formula revolved in his brain.

And, Tozzo saw, there lay the formula. As the article said, the mass would be regained from solar energy converted into matter, the ultimate source of power in the universe. The answer had stared them in the face all this time!

Their long struggle was over.

"And now," Poul Anderson said, "I'm free to go back to my own time?"

Fermeti said simply, "Yes."

"Wait," Tozzo said to his superior. "There's evidently something you don't understand." It was a section which he had read in the instruction manual attached to the time-dredge. He drew Fermeti to one side, where Anderson could not hear. "He can't be sent back to his own time with the knowledge he has now."

"What knowledge?" Fermeti inquired.

"That — well, I'm not certain. Something to do with our society, here. What I'm trying to tell you is this: the first rule of time travel, according to the manual, is don't change the past. In this situation just bringing Anderson here has changed the past merely by exposing him to our society."

Pondering, Fermeti said, "You may be correct. While he was in that gift shop he may have picked up some object which, taken back to his own time, might revolutionize their technology."

"Or at the magazine rack at the spaceport," Tozzo said. "Or on his trip between those two points. And — *even the knowledge that he and his*

colleagues are precogs”

“You’re right,” Fermeti said. “The memory of this trip must be wiped from his brain.” He turned and walked slowly back to Poul Anderson. “Look here,” he addressed him. “I’m sorry to tell you this, but everything that’s happened to you must be wiped from your brain.”

After a pause, Anderson said, “That’s a shame. Sorry to hear that.” He looked downcast. “But I’m not surprised,” he murmured. He seemed philosophical about the whole affair. “It’s generally handled this way.”

Tozzo asked, “Where can this alteration of the memory cells of his brain be accomplished?”

“At the Department of Penology,” Fermeti said. “Through the same channels we obtained the convicts.” Pointing his sleep-gun at Poul Anderson he said, Come along with us. I regret this… but it has to be done.”

VI

At the Department of Penology, painless electroshock removed from Poul Anderson’s brain the precise cells in which his most recent memories were stored. Then, in a semi-conscious state, he was carried back into the time-dredge. A moment later he was on his trip back to the year 1954, to his own society and time. To the Sir Francis Drake Hotel in downtown San Francisco, California and his waiting wife and child.

When the time-dredge returned empty, Tozzo, Gilly and Fermeti breathed a sigh of relief and broke open a bottle of hundred-year-old Scotch which Fermeti had been saving. The mission had been successfully accomplished; now they could turn their attention back to the Project.

“Where’s the manuscript that he wrote?” Fermeti said, putting down his glass to look all around his office.

There was no manuscript to be found. And, Tozzo noticed, the antique Koyal typewriter which they had brought from the Smithsonian -it was gone, too. But why?

Suddenly chill fear traveled up him. He understood.

“Good Lord,” he said thickly. He put down his glass. “Somebody get a copy of the journal with his article in it. At once.”

Fermeti said, “What is it, Aaron? Explain.”

“When we removed his memory of what had happened we made it impossible for him to write the article for the journal,” Tozzo said. “He must have based *Night Flight* on his experience with us, here.” Snatching up the August 1955 copy of *If* he turned to the table-of-contents page.

No article by Poul Anderson was listed. Instead, on page 78, he saw Philip K. Dick's *The Mold of Yancy* listed instead.

They had changed the past after all. And now the formula for their Project was gone — gone entirely.

"We shouldn't have tampered," Tozzo said in a hoarse voice. "We should never have brought him out of the past." He drank a little more of the century-old Scotch, his hands shaking.

"Brought who?" Gilly said, with a puzzled look.

"Don't you remember?" Tozzo stared at him, incredulous.

"What's this discussion about?" Fermeti said impatiently. "And what are you two doing in my office? You both should be busy at work." He saw the bottle of Scotch and blanched. "How'd that get open?"

His hands trembling, Tozzo turned the pages of the journal over and over again. Already, the memory was growing diffuse in his mind; he struggled in vain to hold onto it. They had brought someone from the past, a pre-cog, wasn't it? But who? A name, still in his mind but dimming with each passing moment… Anderson or Anderton, something like that. And in connection with the Bureau's interstellar mass-deprivation Project. Or was it?

Puzzled, Tozzo shook his head and said in bewilderment, "I have some peculiar words in my mind. *Night Flight.* Do either of you happen to know what it refers to?"

"Night Flight" Fermeti echoed. "No, it means nothing to me. I wonder, though - it certainly would be an effective name for our Project."

"Yes," Gilly agreed. "That must be what it refers to."

“But our Project is called *Waterspider,* isn’t it?” Tozzo said. At least he thought it was. He blinked, trying to focus his faculties.

“The truth of the matter, ” Fermeti said, “is that we’ve never titled it.” Brusquely, he added, “But I agree with you; that’s an even better name for it. *Waterspider.* Yes, I like that.”

The door of the office opened and there stood a uniformed, bonded messenger. “From the Smithsonian,” he informed them. “You requested this.” He produced a parcel, which he laid on Fermeti’s desk.

“I don’t remember ordering anything from the Smithsonian,” Fermeti said. Opening it cautiously he found a can of roasted, ground coffee beans, still vacuum packed, over a century old.

The three men looked at one another blankly.

“Strange,” Torelli murmured. “There must be some mistake.”

“Well,” Fletcher said, “in any case, back to Project *Waterspider.”* Nodding, Torelli and Oilman turned in the direction of their own office on the first floor of Outward, Incorporated, the commercial firm at which they has worked and the project on which they had labored, with so many heartaches and setbacks, for so long.

At the Science Fiction Convention at the Sir Francis Drake Hotel, Poul Anderson looked around him in bewilderment. Where had he been? Why had he gone out of the building? And it was an hour later; Tony Boucher and Jim Gunn had left for dinner by now, and he saw no sign of his wife Karen and the baby, either.

The last he remembered was two fans from Battlecreek who wanted him to look at a display outside on the sidewalk. Perhaps he had gone to see that. In any case, he had no memory of the interval.

Anderson groped about in his coat pocket for his pipe, hoping to calm his oddly jittery nerves — and found, not his pipe, but instead a folded piece of paper.

“Got anything for our auction, Poul?” a member of the Convention committee asked, halting beside him. “The auction is just about to start — we have to hurry.”

Still looking at the paper from his pocket, Poul murmured, “Urn, you mean something here with me?”

“Like a typescript of some published story, the original manuscript or earlier versions or notes. You know.” He paused, waiting.

“I seem to have some notes in my pocket,” Poul said, still glancing over them. They were in his handwriting but he didn’t remember having made them. A time-travel story, from the look of them. Must have been from those Bourbons and water, he decided, and not enough to eat. “Here,” he said uncertainly, “it isn’t much but I guess you can auction these.” He took one final glance at them. “Notes for a story about a political figure called Gutman and a kidnapping in time. Intelligent slime mold, too, I notice.” On impulse, he handed them over.

“Thanks,” the man said, and hurried on toward the other room, where the auction was being held.

“I bid ten dollars,” Howard Browne called, smiling broadly. “Then I have to catch a bus to the airport.” The door closed after him.

Karen, with Astrid, appeared beside Poul. “Want to go into the auction?” she asked her husband. “Buy an original Finlay?”

“Um, sure,” Poul Anderson said, and with his wife and child walked slowly after Howard Browne.

What the Dead Men Say

I

The body of Louis Sarapis, in a transparent plastic shatterproof case, had lain on display for one week, exciting a continual response from the public. Distended lines filed past with the customary sniffling, pinched faces, distraught elderly ladies in black cloth coats.

In a corner of the large auditorium in which the casket reposed, Johnny Barefoot impatiently waited for his chance at Sarapis's body. But he did not intend merely to view it; his job, detailed in Sarapis's will, lay in another direction entirely. As Sarapis's public relations manager, his job was — simply — to bring Louis Sarapis back to life.

"Keerum," Barefoot murmured to himself, examining his wristwatch and discovering that two more hours had to pass before the auditorium doors could be finally closed. He felt hungry. And the chill, issuing from the quick-pack envelope surrounding the casket, had increased his discomfort minute by minute.

His wife Sarah Belle approached him, then, with a thermos of hot coffee. "Here, Johnny." She reached up and brushed the black, shiny Chiricahua hair back from his forehead. "You don't look so good."

"No," he agreed. "This is too much for me. I didn't care for him much when he was alive — I certainly don't like him any better this way." He jerked his head at the casket and the double line of mourners.

Sarah Belle said softly, "Nil nisi bonum."

He glowered at her, not sure of what she had said. Some foreign language, no doubt. Sarah Belle had a college degree.

"To quote Thumper Rabbit," Sarah Belle said, smiling gently, " 'if you can't say nothing good, don't say nothing at all.' " She added, "From *Bambi*, an old film classic. If you attended the lectures at the Museum of Modern Art with me every Monday night —"

"Listen," Johnny Barefoot said desperately, "I don't want to bring the old crook back to life, Sarah Belle; how'd I get myself into this? I thought sure when the embolism dropped him like a cement block it meant I could kiss the whole business goodbye forever." But it hadn't quite worked out that way.

"Unplug him," Sarah Belle said.

"W-what?"

She laughed. "Are you afraid to? Unplug the quick-pack power source and he'll warm up. And no resurrection, right?" Her blue-gray eyes danced with amusement. "Scared of him, I guess. Poor Johnny." She patted him on the arm. "I should divorce you, but I won't; you need a mama to take care of you."

"It's wrong," he said. "Louis is completely helpless, lying there in the casket. It would be — unmanly to unplug him."

Sarah Belle said quietly, "But someday, sooner or later, you'll have to confront him, Johnny. And when he's in half-life you'll have the advantage. So it will be a good time; you might come out of it intact." Turning, she trotted off, hands thrust deep in her coat pockets because of the chill.

Gloomily, Johnny lit a cigarette and leaned against the wall behind him. His wife was right, of course. A half-lifer was no match, in direct physical tete-a-tete, for a living person. And yet — he still shrank from it, because

ever since childhood he had been in awe of Louis, who had dominated 3-4 shipping, the Earth to Mars commercial routes, as if he were a model rocket-ship enthusiast pushing miniatures over a paper-mache board in his basement. And now, at his death, at seventy years of age, the old man through Wilhelmina Securities controlled a hundred related — and non-related — industries on both planets. His net worth could not be calculated, even for tax purposes; it was not wise, in fact, to try, even for Government tax experts.

It's my kids, Johnny thought; *I'm thinking about them, in school back in Oklahoma.* To tangle with old Louis would be okay if he wasn't a family man… nothing meant more to him than the two little girls and of course Sarah Belle, too. *I got to think of them, not myself,* he told himself now as he waited for the opportunity to remove the body from the casket in accordance with the old man's detailed instructions. *Let's see. He's probably got about a year in total half-life time, and he'll want it divided up strategically, like at the end of each fiscal year. He'll probably proportion it out over two decades, a month here and there, then towards the end as he runs out, maybe just a week. And then — days.*

And finally old Louis would be down to a couple of hours; the signal would be weak, the dim spark of electrical activity hovering in the frozen brain cells… it would flicker, the words from the amplifying equipment would fade, grow indistinct. And then — silence, at last the grave. But that might be twenty-five years from now; it would be the year 2100 before the old man's cephalic processes ceased entirely.

Johnny Barefoot, smoking his cigarette rapidly, thought back to the day he had slouched anxiously about the personnel office of Archimedean Enterprises, mumbling to the girl at the desk that he wanted a job; he had some brilliant ideas that were for sale, ideas that would help untangle the knot of strikes, the spaceport violence growing out of jurisdictional overlapping by rival unions — ideas that would, in essence, free Sarapis of having to rely on union labor at all. It was a dirty scheme, and he had known it then, but he had been right; it was worth money. The girl had sent

him on to Mr. Pershing, the Personnel Manager, and Pershing had sent him to Louis Sarapis.

“You mean,” Sarapis had said, “I launch from the *ocean?* From the Atlantic, out past the three mile limit?”

“A union is a national organization,” Johnny had said. “Neither outfit has a jurisdiction on the high seas. But a business organization is international.”

“I’d need men out there; I’d need the same number, even more. Where’ll I get them?”

“Go to Burma or India or the Malay States,” Johnny had said. “Get young unskilled laborers and bring them over. Train them yourself on an indentured servant basis. In other words, charge the cost of their passage against their earnings.” It was peonage, he knew. And it appealed to Louis Sarapis. A little empire on the high seas, worked by men who had no legal rights. Ideal.

Sarapis had done just that and hired Johnny for his public relations department; that was the best place for a man who had brilliant ideas of a non-technical nature. In other words, an uneducated man: a *noncol.* A useless misfit, an outsider. A loner lacking college degrees.

“Hey Johnny,” Sarapis had said once. “How come since you’re so bright you never went to school? Everyone knows that’s fatal, nowadays. Self-destructive impulse, maybe?” He had grinned, showing his stainless-steel teeth.

Moodily, he had replied, “You’ve got it, Louis. I want to die. I hate myself.” At that point he had recalled his peonage idea. But that had come after he had dropped out of school, so it couldn’t have been that. “Maybe I should see an analyst,” he had said.

“Fakes,” Louis had told him. “All of them — I know because I’ve had six on my staff, working for me exclusively at one time or another. What’s wrong with you is you’re an envious type; if you can’t have it big you don’t want it, you don’t want the climb, the long struggle.”

But I’ve got it big, Johnny Barefoot realized, had realized even then. *This is big, working for you. Everyone wants to work for Louis Sarapis; he gives all sorts of people jobs.*

The double lines of mourners that filed past the casket… he wondered if all these people could be employees of Sarapis or relatives of employees. Either that or people who had benefited from the public dole that Sarapis had pushed through Congress and into law during the depression three years ago. Sarapis, in his old age the great daddy for the poor, the hungry, the out of work. Soup kitchens, with lines there, too. Just as now.

Perhaps the same people had been in those lines who were here today.

Startling Johnny, an auditorium guard nudged him. “Say, aren’t you Mr. Barefoot, the P.R. man for old Louis?”

“Yes,” Johnny said. He put out his cigarette and then began to unscrew the lid of the thermos of coffee which Sarah Belle had brought him. “Have some,” he said. “Or maybe you’re used to the cold in these civic halls.” The City of Chicago had lent this spot for Louis to lie in state; it was gratitude for what he had done here in this area. The factories he had opened, the men he had put on the payroll.

“I’m not used,” the guard said, accepting a cup of coffee. “You know, Mr. Barefoot, I’ve always admired you because you’re a noncol, and look how you rose to a top job and lots of salary, not to mention fame. It’s an inspiration to us other noncols.”

Grunting, Johnny sipped his own coffee.

“Of course,” the guard said, “I guess it’s really Sarapis we ought to thank; he gave you the job. My brother-in-law worked for him; that was back five years ago when nobody in the world was hiring except Sarapis. You hear what an old skinflint he was — wouldn’t permit the unions to come in, and all. But he gave so many old folks pensions… my father was living on a Sarapis pension-plan until the day he died. And all those bills he got through Congress; they wouldn’t have passed any of the welfare for the needy bills without pressure from Sarapis.”

Johnny grunted.

“No wonder there’re so many people here today,” the guard said. “I can see why. Who’s going to help the little fellow, the noncols like you and me, now that he’s gone?”

Johnny had no answer, for himself or for the guard.

As owner of the Beloved Brethren Mortuary, Herbert Schoenheit von Vogelsang found himself required by law to consult with the late Mr. Sarapis’s legal counsel, the well-known Mr. Claude St. Cyr. In this connection it was essential for him to know precisely how the half-life periods were to be proportioned out; it was his job to execute the technical arrangements.

The matter should have been routine, and yet a snag developed almost at once. He was unable to get in touch with Mr. St. Cyr, trustee for the estate.

Drat, Schoenheit von Vogelsang thought to himself as he hung up the unresponsive phone. *Something must be wrong; this is unheard of in connection with a man so important.*

He had phoned from the bin — the storage vaults in which the half-lifers were kept in perpetual quick-pack. At this moment, a worried-looking clerical sort of individual waited at the desk with a claim check stub in his hand. Obviously he had shown up to collect a relative. Resurrection Day —

the holiday on which the half-lifers were publicly honored — was just around the corner; the rush would soon be beginning.

"Yes sir," Herb said to him, with an affable smile. "I'll take your stub personally."

"It's an elderly lady," the customer said. "About eighty, very small and wizened. I didn't want just to talk to her; I wanted to take her out for a while." He explained, "My grandmother."

"Only a moment," Herb said, and went back into the bin to search out number 3054039-B.

When he located the correct party he scrutinized the lading report attached; it gave but fifteen days of half-life remaining. Automatically, he pressed a portable amplifier into the hull of the glass casket, tuned it, listened at the proper frequency for indication of cephalic activity.

Faintly from the speaker came, "…and then Tillie sprained her ankle and we never thought it'd heal; she was so foolish about it, wanting to start walking immediately…"

Satisfied, he unplugged the amplifier and located a union man to perform the actual task of carting 3054039-B to the loading platform, where the customer could place her in his 'copter or car.

"You checked her out?" the customer asked as he paid the money due.

"Personally," Herb answered. "Functioning perfectly." He smiled at the customer. "Happy Resurrection Day, Mr. Ford."

"Thank you," the customer said, starting off for the loading platform. *When I pass,* Herb said to himself, *I think I'll will my heirs to revive me one day a century. That way I can observe the fate of all mankind.* But that

meant a rather high maintenance cost to the heirs, and no doubt sooner or later they would kick over the traces, have the body taken out of quick-pack and — God forbid — buried.

“Burial is barbaric,” Herb murmured aloud. “Remnant of the primitive origins of our culture.”

“Yes sir,” his secretary Miss Beasman agreed, at her typewriter. In the bin, several customers communed with their half-lifer relations, in rapt quiet, distributed at intervals along the aisles which separated the caskets. It was a tranquil sight, these faithfuls, coming as they did so regularly, to pay homage. They brought messages, news of what took place in the outside world; they cheered the gloomy half-lifers in these intervals of cerebral activity. And — they paid Herb Schoenheit von Vogelsang; it was a profitable business, operating a mortuary.

“My dad seems a little frail,” a young man said, catching Herb’s attention. “I wonder if you could take a moment to check him over. I’d really appreciate it.”

‘Certainly,” Herb said, accompanying the customer down the aisle to his deceased relative. The lading report showed only a few days remaining; that explained the vitiated quality of cerebration. But still — he turned up the gain, and the voice from the half-lifer became a trifle stronger. *He’s almost at an end,* Herb thought. It was obvious that the son did not want to see the lading, did not actually care to know that contact with his dad was diminishing, finally. So Herb said nothing; he merely walked off, leaving the son to commune. Why tell him? Why break the bad news?

A truck had now appeared at the loading platform, and two men hopped down from it, wearing familiar pale blue uniforms. Atlas Interplan Van and Storage, Herb realized. Delivering another half-lifer, or here to pick up one which had expired. He strolled toward them. “Yes, gentlemen,” he said.

The driver of the truck leaned out and said, “We’re here to deliver Mr. Louis Sarapis. Got room all ready?”

“Absolutely,” Herb said at once. “But I can’t get hold of Mr. St. Cyr to make arrangements for the schedule. When’s he to be brought back?”

Another man, dark-haired, with shiny-button black eyes, emerged from the truck. “I’m John Barefoot. According to the terms of the will I’m in charge of Mr. Sarapis. He’s to be brought back to life immediately; that’s the instructions I’m charged with.”

“I see,” Herb said, nodding. “Well, that’s fine. Bring him in and we’ll plug him right in.”

“It’s cold, here,” Barefoot said. “Worse than the auditorium.”

“Well of course,” Herb answered.

The crew from the van began wheeling the casket. Herb caught a glimpse of the dead man, the massive, gray face resembling something cast from a break-mold. *Impressive old pirate,* he thought. *Good thing for us all he’s dead finally, in spite of his charity work. Because who wants charity? Especially his.* Of course, Herb did not say that to Barefoot; he contented himself with guiding the crew to the prearranged spot.

“I’ll have him talking in fifteen minutes,” he promised Barefoot, who looked tense. “Don’t worry; we’ve had almost no failures at this stage; the initial residual charge is generally quite vital.”

I suppose it’s later,” Barefoot said, “as it dims… then you have the technical problems.”

“Why does he want to be brought back so soon?” Herb asked.

Barefoot scowled and did not answer.

“Sorry,” Herb said, and continued tinkering with the wires which had to be seated perfectly to the cathode terminals of the casket. “At low temperatures,” he murmured, “the flow of current is virtually unimpeded. There’s no measurable resistance at minus 150. So —” He fitted the anode cap in place. “The signal should bounce out clear and strong.” In conclusion, he clicked the amplifier on.

A hum. Nothing more.

“Well?” Barefoot said.

“I’ll recheck,” Herb said, wondering what had gone afoul.

“Listen,” Barefoot said quietly, “if you slip up here and let the spark flicker out —” It was not necessary for him to finish; Herb knew.

“Is it the Democratic-Republican National Convention that he wants to participate in?” Herb asked. The Convention would be held later in the month, in Cleveland. In the past, Sarapis had been quite active in the behind-the-scenes activities at both the Democratic-Republican and the Liberal Party nominating conventions. It was said, in fact, that he had personally chosen the last Democratic-Republican Presidential candidate, Alfonse Gam. Tidy, handsome Gam had lost, but not by very much.

“Are you still getting nothing?” Barefoot asked.

“Um, it seems —” Herb said.

“Nothing. Obviously.” Now Barefoot looked grim. “If you can’t rouse him in another ten minutes I’ll get hold of Claude St. Cyr and we’ll take Louis out of your mortuary and lodge charges of negligence against you.”

“I’m doing what I can,” Herb said, perspiring as he fiddled with the leads to the casket. “We didn’t perform the quick-pack installation,

remember; there may have been a slip-up at that point."

Now static supervened over the steady hum.

"Is that him coming in?" Barefoot demanded.

"No," Herb admitted, thoroughly upset by now. It was, in fact, a bad sign.

"Keep trying," Barefoot said. But it was unnecessary to tell Herbert Schoenheit von Vogelsang that; he was struggling desperately, with all he had, with all his years of professional competence in this field. And still he achieved nothing; Louis Sarapis remained silent.

I'm not going to be successful, Herb realized in fear. *I don't understand why, either. WHAT'S WRONG? A big client like this, and it has to get fouled up.* He toiled on, not looking at Barefoot, not daring to.

At the radio telescope at Kennedy Slough, on the dark side of Luna, Chief Technician Owen Angress discovered that he had picked up a signal emanating from a region one light-week beyond the solar system in the direction of Proxima. Ordinarily such a region of space would have held little of interest for the U.N. Commission on Deep-Space Communications, but this, Owen Angress realized, was unique.

What reached him, thoroughly amplified by the great antennae of the radio telescope, was, faintly but clearly, a human voice.

"…probably let it slide by," the voice was declaring. "If I know them, and I believe I do. That Johnny; he'd revert without my keeping my eye on him, but at least he's not a crook like St. Cyr. I did right to fire St. Cyr. Assuming I can make it stick…" The voice faded momentarily.

What's out there? Angress wondered, dazedly. "At one fifty-second of a light-year," he murmured, making a quick mark on the deep-space map

which he had been recharting. “Nothing. That’s just empty dust-clouds.” He could not understand what the signal implied; was it being bounced back to Luna from some nearby transmitter? Was this, in other words, merely an echo?

Or was he reading his computation incorrectly?

Surely this couldn’t be correct. Some individual ruminating at a transmitter out beyond the solar system… a man not in a hurry, thinking aloud in a kind of half-slumbering attitude, as if free-associating… it made no sense.

I’d better report this to Wycoff at the Soviet Academy of Sciences, he said to himself. Wycoff was his current supervisor; next month it would be Jamison of MIT. *Maybe it’s a long-haul ship that —*

The voice filtered in clearly once again. “…that Gam is a fool; did wrong to select him. Know better now but too late. Hello?” The thoughts became sharp, the words more distinct. “Am I coming back? — for god’s sake, it’s about time. Hey! Johnny! Is that you?”

Angress picked up the telephone and dialed the code for the line to the Soviet Union.

“Speak up, Johnny!” the voice from the speaker demanded plaintively. “Come on, son; I’ve got so damn much on my mind. So much to do. Convention’s started yet, has it? Got no sense of time stuck in here, can’t see or hear; wait’ll you get here and you’ll find out…” Again the voice faded.

This is exactly what Wycoff likes to call a “phenomenon,” Angress realized.

And I can understand why.

II

On the evening television news, Claude St. Cyr heard the announcer babbling about a discovery made by the radio telescope on Luna, but he paid little attention: he was busy mixing martinis for his guests.

“Yes,” he said to Gertrude Harvey, “ironic as it is, I drew up the will myself, including the clause that automatically dismissed me, canceled my services out of existence the moment he died. And I’ll tell you why Louis did that; he had paranoid suspicions of me, so he figured that with such a clause he’d insure himself against being —” He paused as he measured out the iota of dry wine which accompanied the gin. “Being prematurely dispatched.” He grinned, and Gertrude, arranged decoratively on the couch beside her husband, smiled back.

“A lot of good it did him,” Phil Harvey said.

“Hell,” St. Cyr protested. “I had nothing to do with his death; it was an embolus, a great fat clot stuck like a cork in a bottleneck.” He laughed at the image. “Nature’s own remedy.”

Gertrude said, “Listen. The TV; it’s saying something strange.” She rose, walked over to it and bent down, her «ar close to the speaker.

“It’s probably that oaf Kent Margrave,” St. Cyr said. “Making another political speech.” Margrave had been their President now for four years; a Liberal, he had managed to defeat Alfonse Gam, who had been Louis Sarapis’ hand-picked choice for the office. Actually Margrave, for all his faults, was quite a politician; he had managed to convince large blocs of voters that having a puppet of Sarapis’ for their President was not such a good idea.

“No,” Gertrude said, carefully arranging her skirt over her bare knees. “This is — the space agency, I think. Science.”

“Science!” St. Cyr laughed. “Well, then let’s listen; I admire science. Turn it up.” *I suppose they’ve found another planet in the Orionus System,* he said to himself. *Something more for us to make the goal of our collective existence.*

“A voice,” the TV announcer was saying, “emanating from outer space, tonight has scientists both in the United States and the Soviet Union completely baffled.”

“Oh no,” St. Cyr choked. “A voice from outer space — please, no more.” Doubled up with laughter, he moved off, away from the TV set; he could not bear to listen any more. “That’s what we need,” he said to Phil. “A voice that turns out to be — you know Who it is.”

“Who?” Phil asked.

“God, of course. The radio telescope at Kennedy Slough has picked up the voice of God and now we’re going to receive another set of divine commandments or at least a few scrolls.” Removing his glasses he wiped his eyes with his Irish linen handkerchief.

Dourly, Phil Harvey said, “Personally I agree with my wife; I find it fascinating.”

“Listen, my friend,” St. Cyr said, “you know it’ll turn out to be a transistor radio that some Jap student lost on a trip between Earth and Callisto. And the radio just drifted on out of the solar system entirely and now the telescope has picked it up and it’s a huge mystery to all the scientists.” He became more sober. “Shut it off, Gert; we’ve got serious things to consider.”

Obediently but reluctantly she did so. “Is it true, Claude,” she asked, rising to her feet, “that the mortuary wasn’t able to revive old Louis? That he’s not in half-life as he’s supposed to be by now?”

“Nobody tells me anything from the organization, now,” St. Cyr answered. “But I did hear a rumor to that effect.” He knew, in fact, that it was so; he had many friends within Wilhelmina, but he did not like to talk about these surviving links. “Yes, I suppose that’s so,” he said.

Gertrude shivered. “Imagine not coming back. How dreadful.”

“But that was the old natural condition,” her husband pointed out as he drank his martini. “Nobody had half-life before the turn of the century.”

“But we’re used to it,” she said stubbornly.

To Phil Harvey, St. Cyr said, “Let’s continue our discussion.”

Shrugging, Harvey said, “All right. If you really feel there’s something to discuss.” He eyed St. Cyr critically. “I could put you on my legal staff, yes. If that’s what you’re sure you want. But I can’t give you the kind of business that Louis could. It wouldn’t be fair to the legal men I have in there now.”

“Oh, I recognize that,” St. Cyr said. After all, Harvey’s drayage firm was small in comparison with the Sarapis outfits; Harvey was in fact a minor figure in the 3-4 shipping business.

But that was precisely what St. Cyr wanted. Because he believed that within a year with the experience and contacts he had gained working for Louis Sarapis he could depose Harvey and take over Elektra Enterprises.

Harvey’s first wife had been named Elektra. St. Cyr had known her, and after she and Harvey had split up St. Cyr had continued to see her, now in a

more personal — and more spirited — way. It had always seemed to him that Elektra Harvey had obtained a rather bad deal; Harvey had employed legal talent of sufficient caliber to outwit Elektra's attorney… who had been, as a matter of fact, St. Cyr's junior law partner, Harold Faine. Ever since her defeat in the courts, St. Cyr had blamed himself; why hadn't he taken the case personally? But he had been so tied up with Sarapis business … it had simply not been possible.

Now, with Sarapis gone and his job with Atlas, Wilhelmina and Archimedean over, he could take some time to rectify the imbalance; he could come to the aid of the woman (he admitted it) whom he loved.

But that was a long step from this situation; first he had to get into Harvey's legal staff — at any cost. Evidently, he was succeeding.

"Shall we shake on it, then?" he asked Harvey, holding out his hand.

"Okay," Harvey said, not very much stirred by the event. He held out his hand, however, and they shook. "By the way," he said, then, "I have some knowledge — fragmentary but evidently accurate — as to why Sarapis cut you off in his will. And it isn't what you said at all."

"Oh?" St. Cyr said, trying to sound casual.

"My understanding is that he suspected someone, possibly you, of desiring to prevent him from returning to half-life. That you were going to select a particular mortuary which certain contacts of yours operate … and they'd somehow fail to revive the old man." He eyed St. Cyr. "And oddly, that seems to be exactly what has happened."

There was silence.

Gertrude said, at last, "Why would Claude not want Louis Sarapis to be resurrected?"

“I have no idea,” Harvey said. He stroked his chin thoughtfully. “I don’t even fully understand half-life itself. Isn’t it true that the half-lifer often finds himself in possession of a sort of insight, of a new frame of reference, a perspective, that he lacked while alive?”

“I’ve heard psychologists say that,” Gertrude agreed. “It’s what the old theologists called *conversion.”*

“Maybe Claude was afraid of some insight that Louis might show up with,” Harvey said. “But that’s just conjecture.”

“Conjecture,” Claude St. Cyr agreed, “in its entirety, including that as to any such plan as you describe; in actual fact I know absolutely no one in the mortuary business.” His voice was steady, too; he made it come out that way. But this all was very sticky, he said to himself. Quite awkward.

The maid appeared, then, to tell them that dinner was ready. Both Phil and Gertrude rose, and Claude joined them as they entered the dining room together.

“Tell me,” Phil Harvey said to Claude. “Who is Sarapis’ heir?” St. Cyr said, “A granddaughter who lives on Callisto; her name is Kathy Egmont and she’s an odd one … she’s about twenty years old and already she’s been in jail five times, mostly for narcotics addiction. Lately, I understand, she’s managed to cure herself of the drug habit and now she’s a religious convert of some kind. I’ve never met her but I’ve handled volumes of correspondence passing between her and old Louis.”

“And she gets the entire estate, when it’s out of probate? With all the political power inherent in it?”

“Haw,” St. Cyr said. “Political power can’t be willed, can’t be passed on. All Kathy gets is the economic syndrome. It functions, as you know, through the parent holding company licensed under the laws of the state of

Delaware, Wilhelmina Securities, and that's hers, if she cares to make use of it — if she can understand what it is she's inheriting."

Phil Harvey said, "You don't sound very optimistic."

"All the correspondence from her indicates — to me at least — that she's a sick, criminal type, very eccentric and unstable. The very last sort I'd like to see inherit Louis's holdings."

On that note, they seated themselves at the dinner table.

In the night, Johnny Barefoot heard the phone, drew himself to a sitting position and fumbled until his hands touched the receiver. Beside him in the bed Sarah Belle stirred as he said gratingly, "Hello. Who the hell is it?"

A fragile female voice said, "I'm sorry, Mr. Barefoot… I didn't mean to wake you up. But I was told by my attorney to call you as soon as I arrived on Earth." She added, "This is Kathy Egmont, although actually my real name is Mrs. Kathy Sharp. Do you know who I am?"

"Yes," Johnny said, rubbing his eyes and yawning. He shivered from the cold of the room; beside him, Sarah Belle drew the covers back up over her shoulders and turned the other way. "Want me to come and pick you up? Do you have a place to stay?"

"I have no friends here on Terra," Kathy said. "But the spaceport people told me that the Severely is a good hotel, so I'm going there. I started from Callisto as soon as I heard that my grandfather had died,"

"You made good time," he said. He hadn't expected her for another twenty-four hours.

"Is there any chance —" The girl sounded timid. "Could I possibly stay with you, Mr. Barefoot? It scares me, the idea of a big hotel where no one knows me."

“I’m sorry,” he said at once. “I’m married.” And then he realized that such a retort was not only inappropriate … it was actually abusive. “What I mean is,” he explained, “I have no spare room. You stay at the Severely tonight and tomorrow we’ll find you a more acceptable apartment.”

“All right,” Kathy said. She sounded resigned but still anxious. “Tell me, Mr. Barefoot, what luck have you had with my grandfather’s resurrection? Is he in half-life, now?”

“No,” Johnny said. “It’s failed, so far. They’re working on it.”

When he had left the mortuary, five technicians had been busy at work, trying to discover what was wrong.

Kathy said, “I thought it might work out that way.”

“Why?”

“Well, my grandfather — he was so different from everyone else. I realize you know that, perhaps even better than I… after all, you were with him daily. But — I just couldn’t imagine him inert, the way the half-lifers are. Passive and helpless, you know. Can you imagine him like that, after all he’s done?”

Johnny said, “Let’s talk tomorrow; I’ll come by the hotel about nine. Okay?”

“Yes, that’s fine. I’m glad to have met you, Mr. Barefoot. I hope you’ll stay on with Archimedean, working for me. Goodbye.” The phone clicked; she had rung off.

My new boss, Johnny said to himself. *Wow.*

“Who was that?” Sarah Belle murmured. “At this hour?”

“The owner of Archimedean,” Johnny said. “My employer.”

“Louis Sarapis?” His wife sat up at once. “Oh… you mean his granddaughter; she’s here already. What’s she sound like?”

“I can’t tell,” he said meditatively. “Frightened, mostly. It’s a finite, small world she comes from, compared with Terra, here.” He did not tell his wife the things he knew about Kathy, her drug addiction, her terms in jail.

“Can she take over now?” Sarah Belle asked. “Doesn’t she have to wait until Louis’s half-life is over?”

“Legally, he’s dead. His will has come into *force.” And,* he thought acidly, *he’s not in half-life anyhow; he’s silent and dead in his plastic casket, in his quick-pack, which evidently wasn’t quite quick enough.*

“How do you think you’ll get along with her?”

“I don’t know,” he said candidly. “I’m not even sure I’m going to try.” He did not like the idea of working for a woman, especially one younger than himself. And one who was — at least according to hearsay — virtually psychopathic. But on the phone she had certainly not sounded psychopathic. He mulled that over in his mind, wide-awake now.

“She’s probably very pretty,” Sarah Belle said. “You’ll probably fall in love with her and desert me.”

“Oh no,” he said. “Nothing as startling as that. I’ll probably try to work for her, drag out a few miserable months, and then give up and look elsewhere.” *And meanwhile,* he thought, *WHAT ABOUT LOUIS? Are we, or are we not, going to be able to revive him?* That was the really big unknown.

If the old man could be revived, he could direct his granddaughter; even though legally and physically dead, he could continue to manage his complex economic and political sphere, to some extent. But right now this was simply not working out, and the old man had planned on being revived at once, certainly before the Democratic-Republican Convention. Louis certainly knew — or rather had known — what sort of person he was willing his holdings to. Without help she surely could not function. *And,* Johnny thought, *there's little I can do for her. Claude St. Cyr could have, but by the terms of the will he's out of the picture entirely. So what is left? We must keep trying to revive old Louis, even if we have to visit every mortuary in the United States, Cuba and Russia.*

"You're thinking confused thoughts," Sarah Belle said. "I can tell by your expression." She turned on the small lamp by the bed, and was now reaching for her robe. "Don't try to solve serious matters in the middle of the night."

This must be how half-life feels, he thought groggily. He shook his head, trying to clear it, to wake up fully.

The next morning he parked his car in the underground garage of the Beverely and ascended by elevator to the lobby and the front desk where he was greeted by the smiling day clerk. It was not much of a hotel, Johnny decided. Clean, however; a respectable family hotel which probably rented many of its units by the month, some no doubt to elderly retired people. Evidently Kathy was accustomed to living modestly.

In answer to his query, the clerk pointed to the adjoining coffee shop. "You'll find her in there, eating breakfast. She said you might be calling, Mr. Barefoot."

In the coffee shop he found a good number of people having breakfast; he stopped short, wondering which was Kathy. The dark-haired girl with the stilted, frozen features, over in the far corner out of the way? He walked toward her. Her hair, he decided, was dyed. Without makeup she looked unnaturally pale; her skin had a stark quality, as if she had known a good

deal of suffering, and not the sort that taught or informed one, made one into a “better” person. It had been pure pain, with no redemptive aspects, he decided as he studied her.

“Kathy?” he asked.

The girl turned her head. Her eyes, empty; her expression totally flattened. In a little voice she said, “Yes. Are you John Barefoot?” As he came up to the booth and seated himself opposite her she watched as if she imagined he would spring at her, hurl himself on her and — God forbid — sexually assault her. *It’s as if she’s nothing more than a lone, small animal,* he thought. *Backed into a corner to face the entire world.*

The color, or rather lack of it, could stem from the drug addiction, he decided. But that did not explain the flatness of her tone, and her utter lack of facial expression. And yet — she was pretty. She had delicate, regular features… animated, they would have been interesting. And perhaps they had been, once. Years ago.

“I have only five dollars left,” Kathy said. “After I paid for my one-way ticket and my hotel and my breakfast. Could you —” She hesitated. “I’m not sure exactly what to do. Could you tell me… do I own anything yet? Anything that was my grandfather’s? That I could borrow against?”

Johnny said, “I’ll write you a personal check for one hundred dollars and you can pay me back sometime.” He got out his checkbook.

“Really?” She looked stunned, and now, faintly, she smiled. “How trusting of you. Or are you trying to impress me? You were my grandfather’s public relations man, weren’t you? How were you dealt with in the will? I can’t remember; it’s all happened so fast, it’s been so blurred.”

“Well,” he said, “I wasn’t fired, as was Claude St. Cyr.”

“Then you’re staying on.” That seemed to relieve her mind. “I wonder… would it be correct to say you’re now working for *me?”*

“You could say that,” Johnny said. “Assuming you feel you need a P.R. man. Maybe you don’t. Louis wasn’t sure, half the time.”

“Tell me what efforts have been made to resurrect him.”

He explained to her, briefly, what he had done.

“And this is not generally known?” she asked.

“Definitely not. I know it, a mortuary owner with the unnatural name of Herb Schoenheit von Vogelsang knows it, and possibly news has trickled to a few high people in the drayage business, such as Phil Harvey. Even Claude St. Cyr may know it, by now. Of course, as time goes on and Louis has nothing to say, no political pronouncements for the press —”

“We’ll have to make them up,” Kathy said. “And pretend they’re from him. That will be your job, Mr. Funnyfoot.” She smiled once more. “Press-releases by my grandfather, until he’s finally revived or we give up. Do you think we’ll have to give up?” After a pause she said softly, “I’d like to see him. If I may. If you think it’s all right.”

“I’ll take you there, to the Blessed Brethren Mortuary. I have to go there within the hour anyhow.”

Nodding, Kathy resumed eating her breakfast.

As Johnny Barefoot stood beside the girl, who gazed intently at the transparent casket, he thought bizarrely, *Maybe she’ll rap on the glass and say, “Grandfather, you wake up.” And,* he thought, *maybe that will accomplish it. Certainly nothing else has.*

Wringing his hands, Herb Schoenheit von Vogelsang burbled miserably, “I just don’t understand it, Mr. Barefoot. We worked all night, in relays, and we just aren’t getting a single spark. And yet we ran an electrocephalograph and the ‘gram shows faint but unmistakable cerebral activity. So the after-life is there, but we can’t seem to contact it. We’ve got probes at every part of the skull, now, as you can see.” He pointed to the maze of hair-wires connecting the dead man’s head to the amplifying equipment surrounding the casket. “I don’t know what else we can do, sir.”

“Is there measurable brain metabolism?” Johnny asked.

“Yes sir. We called in outside experts and they detected it; it’s a normal amount, too, just what you’d expect, immediately after death.”

Kathy said calmly, “I know it’s hopeless. He’s too big a man for this. This is for aged relatives. For grandmothers, to be trotted out once a year on Resurrection Day.” She turned away from the casket. “Let’s go,” she said to Johnny.

Together, he and the girl walked along the sidewalk from the mortuary, neither speaking. It was a mild spring day, and the trees here and there at the curb had small pink flowers. Cherry trees, Johnny decided.

“Death,” Kathy murmured, at last. “And rebirth. A technological miracle. Maybe when Louis saw what it was like on the other side he changed his mind about coming back… maybe he just doesn’t *want* to return.”

“Well,” Johnny said, “the electrical spark is there; he’s inside there, thinking something.” He let Kathy take his arm as they crossed the street. “Someone told me,” he said quietly, “that you’re interested in religion.”

“Yes, I am,” Kathy said quietly. “You see, when I was a narcotics addict I took an overdose — never mind of what — and as a result my heart action ceased. I was officially, medically, dead for several minutes; they brought

me back by open-chest heart massage and electroshock… you know. During that time I had an experience, probably much like what those who go into half-life have experienced."

"Was it better than here?"

"No," she said. "But it was different. It was — dreamlike. I don't mean vague or unreal. I mean the logic, the weightlessness; you see, that's the main difference. You're free of gravity. It's hard to realize how important that is, but just think how many of the characteristics of the dream derive from that one fact."

Johnny said, "And it changed you."

"I managed to overcome the oral addictive aspects of my personality, if that's what you mean. I learned to control my appetites. My greed." At a newspaper stand Kathy halted to read the headlines. "Look," she said.

VOICE FROM OUTER SPACE BAFFLES SCIENTISTS

"Interesting," Johnny said.

Kathy, picking up the newspaper, read the article which accompanied the headline. "How strange," she said. "They've picked up a sentient, living entity… here, you can read it, too." She passed the newspaper to him. "I did that, when I died… I drifted out, free of the solar system, first planetary gravity then the sun's. I wonder who it is." Taking the newspaper back she reread the article.

"Ten cents, sir or madam," the robot vender said, suddenly.

Johnny tossed it the dime.

"Do you think it's my grandfather?" Kathy asked.

"Hardly," Johnny said.

“I think it is,” Kathy said, staring past him, deep in thought. “I know it is; look, it began one week after his death, and it’s one light-week out. The time fits, and here’s the transcript of what it’s saying.” She pointed to the column. “All about you, Johnny, and about me and about Claude St. Cyr, that lawyer he fired, and the Convention; it’s all there, but garbled. That’s the way your thoughts run, when you’re dead; all compressed, instead of in sequence.” She smiled up at Johnny. “So we’ve got a terrible problem. We can hear him, by use of the radio telescope at Kennedy Slough. But he can’t hear us.”

“You don’t actually —”

“Oh, I do,” she said matter-of-factly. “I knew he wouldn’t settle for half-life; this is a whole, entire life he’s leading now, out in space, there, beyond the last planet of our system. And there isn’t going to be any way we can interfere with him; whatever it is he’s doing —” She began to walk on, once more; Johnny followed. “Whatever it is, it’s going to be at least as much as he did when he was alive here on Terra. You can be sure of that. Are you afraid?”

“Hell,” Johnny protested, “I’m not even convinced, let alone afraid.” And yet — perhaps she was right. She seemed so certain about it. He could not help being a little impressed, a little convinced.

“You should be afraid,” Kathy said. “He may be very strong, out there. He may be able to do a lot. Affect a lot… affect us, what we do and say and believe. Even without the radio telescope — he may be reaching us, even now. Subliminally.”

“I don’t believe it,” Johnny said. But he did, in spite of himself. She was right; it was just what Louis Sarapis would do.

Kathy said, “We’ll know more when the Convention begins, because that’s what he cares about. He failed to get Gam elected last time, and that

was one of the few times in his life that he was beaten."

"Gam!" Johnny echoed, amazed. "That has-been? Is he even still in existence? Why, he completely disappeared, four years ago —"

"My grandfather won't give up with him," Kathy said meditatively. "And he is alive; he's a turkey farmer or some such thing, on Io. Perhaps it's ducks. Anyhow, he's there. Waiting."

"Waiting for what?"

Kathy said, "For my grandfather to contact him again. As he did before, four years ago, at the Convention then."

"No one would vote for Gam again!" Repelled, he gazed at her.

Smiling, Kathy said nothing. But she squeezed his arm, hugging him. As if, he thought, she were afraid again, as she had been in the night, when he had talked to her. Perhaps even more so.

III

The handsome, dapper, middle-aged man wearing vest and narrow, old-fashioned necktie, rose to his feet as Claude St. Cyr entered the outer office of St. Cyr and Faine, on his way to court. “Mr. St. Cyr —”

Glancing at him, St. Cyr murmured, “I’m in a rush; you’ll have to make an appointment with my secretary.” And then he recognized the man. He was talking to Alfonse Gam.

“I have a telegram,” Gam said. “From Louis Sarapis.” He reached into his coat pocket.

“Sorry,” St. Cyr said stiffly. “I’m associated with Mr. Phil Harvey now; my business relationship with Mr. Sarapis was terminated several weeks ago.” But he paused, curious. He had met Gam before; at the time of the national campaign, four years ago, he had seen a good deal of the man — in fact, he had represented Gam in several libel suits, one with Gam as the plaintiff, the other as defendant. He did not like the man.

Gam said, “This wire arrived the day before yesterday.”

“But Sarapis has been —” Claude St. Cyr broke off. “Let me see it.” He held out his hand, and Gam passed him the wire.

It was a statement from Louis Sarapis to Gam, assuring Gam of Louis’s utter and absolute support in the forthcoming struggle at the Convention. And Gam was correct; the wire was dated only three days before. It did not make sense.

“I can’t explain it, Mr. St. Cyr,” Gam said dryly. “But it sounds like Louis. He wants me to run again. As you can see. It never occurred to me;

as far as I’m concerned I’m out of politics and in the guinea-fowl business. I thought you might know something about this, who sent it and why.” He added, “Assuming that old Louis didn’t.”

St. Cyr said, “How could Louis have sent it?”

“I mean, written it before his death and had someone send it just the other day. Yourself, perhaps.” Gam shrugged. “Evidently it wasn’t you. Perhaps Mr. Barefoot, then.” He reached out for his wire.

“Do you actually intend to run again?” St. Cyr asked.

“If Louis wants me to.”

“And lose again? Drag the party to defeat again, just because of one stubborn, vindictive old man —” St. Cyr broke off. “Go back to raising guinea fowl. Forget politics. You’re a loser, Gam. Everyone in the party knows it. Everyone in America, in fact.”

“How can I contact Mr. Barefoot?”

St. Cyr said, “I have no idea.” He started on.

“I’ll need legal help,” Gam said.

“For what? Who’s suing you now? You don’t need legal help, Mr. Gam; you need medical help, a psychiatrist to explain why you want to run again. Listen —” He leaned toward Gam. “If Louis alive couldn’t get you into office, Louis dead certainly can’t.” He went on, then, leaving Gam standing there.

“Wait,” Gam said.

Reluctantly, Claude St. Cyr turned around.

“This time I’m going to win,” Gam said. He sounded as if he meant it; his voice, instead of its usual reedy flutter, was firm.

Uneasy, St. Cyr said, “Well, good luck. To both you and Louis.”

“Then he *is* alive.” Gam’s eyes flickered.

“I didn’t say that; I was being ironic.”

Gam said thoughtfully, “But he is alive; I’m sure of it. I’d like to find him. I went to some of the mortuaries, but none of them had him, or if they did they wouldn’t admit it. I’ll keep looking; I want to confer with him.” He added, “That’s why I came here from Io.”

At that point, St. Cyr managed to break away and depart. *What a nonentity,* he said to himself. *A cypher, nothing but a puppet of Louis’s.* He shuddered. *God protect us from such a fate: that man as our President.*

Imagine us all *becoming like Gam!*

It was not a pleasant thought; it did not inspire him for the day ahead. And he had a good deal of work on his shoulders.

This was the day that he, as attorney for Phil Harvey, would make Mrs. Kathy Sharp — the former Kathy Egmont — an offer for Wilhelmina Securities. An exchange of stock would be involved; voting stock, redistributed in such a fashion that Harvey gained control of Wilhelmina. The worth of the corporation being almost impossible to calculate, Harvey was offering not money but real estate in exchange; he had enormous tracts of land on Ganymede, deeded to him by the Soviet Government a decade ago in exchange for technical assistance he had rendered it and its colonies.

The chance of Kathy accepting was nil.

And yet, the offer had to be made. The next step — he shrank from even thinking about it — involved a fracas to the death in the area of direct economic competition, between Harvey's drayage firm and hers. And hers, he knew, was now in a state of decay; there had been union trouble since the old man's death. The thing that Louis hated the most had started to take place: union organizers had begun to move in on Archimedean.

He himself sympathized with the unions; it was about time they came onto the scene. Only the old man's dirty tactics and his boundless energy, not to speak of his ruthless, eternal imagination, had kept them out. Kathy had none of these. And Johnny Barefoot —

What can you ask of a noncol? St. Cyr asked himself caustically. *Brilliant strategy-purse out of the sow's ear of mediocrity?*

And Barefoot had his hands full building up Kathy's image before the public; he had barely begun to succeed in that when the union squabbles broke out. An ex-narcotics addict and religious nut, a woman who had a criminal record… Johnny had his work cut out for him.

Where he had been productive lay in the area of the woman's physical appearance. She looked sweet, even gentle and pure; almost saintly. And Johnny had seized on this. Instead of quoting her in the press he had photographed her, a thousand wholesome poses: with dogs, children, at county fairs, at hospitals, involved in charity drives — the whole business.

But unfortunately Kathy had spoiled the image he had created, spoiled it in a rather unusual way.

Kathy maintained — simply — that she was in communication with her grandfather. That it was he who lay a light-week out in space, picked up by Kennedy Slough. She heard him, as the rest of the world did… and by some miracle he heard her, too.

St. Cyr, riding the self-service elevator up to the 'copter port on the roof, laughed aloud. Her religious crankery couldn't be kept from the gossip columnists… Kathy had said too much in public places, in restaurants and

small, famous bars. And even with Johnny beside her. Even he couldn't keep her quiet.

Also, there had been that incident at that party in which she had taken off her clothes, declaring the hour of purification to be momentarily arriving; she had daubed herself in certain spots with crimson nail polish, as well, a sort of ritual ceremony… of course she had been drinking.

And this is the woman, St. Cyr thought, *who operates Archimedean. The woman we must oust, for our good* and *the public's.* It was, to him, practically a mandate in the name of the people. Virtually a public service to be performed, and the only one who did not see it that way was Johnny.

St. Cyr thought, *Johnny LIKES her. There's the motive.*

I wonder, he mused, *what Sarah Belle thinks of that.*

Feeling cheerful, St. Cyr entered his 'copter, closed the hatch and inserted his key in the ignition. And then he thought once again of Alfonse Gam. And his good humor vanished at once; again he felt glum.

There are two people, he realized, *who are acting on the assumption that old Louis Sarapis is alive; Kathy Egmont Sharp and Alfonse Gam.*

Two most unsavory people, too. And, in spite of himself, he was being forced to associate with both of them. It seemed to be his fate.

He thought, *I'm no better off than I was with old Louis. In some respects, I'm even worse off.*

The 'copter rose into the sky, on its way to Phil Harvey's building in downtown Denver.

Being late, he snapped on the little transmitter, picked up the microphone and put in a call to Harvey. "Phil," he said, "Can you hear me?

This is St. Cyr and I'm on my way west." He listened, then.

Listened, and heard from the speaker a far-off weird babble, a murmur as if many words were being blended into a confusion. He recognized it; he had come onto it several times now, on the TV news programs.

"… spite of personal attacks, much superior to Chambers, who couldn't win an election for house of ill repute janitor. You keep up faith in yourself, Alfonse. People know a good man, value him; you wait. Faith moves mountains. I ought to know, look what I've accomplished in my life…"

It was, St. Cyr realized, the entity a light-week out, now emitting an even more powerful signal; like sunspots, it beclouded normal transmission channels. He cursed, scowled, then snapped off the receiver.

Fouling up communications, he said to himself. *Must be against the law; I ought to consult the FCC.*

Shaken, he piloted his 'copter on, across open farm land.

My God, he thought, *it did sound like old Louis!*

Could Kathy Egmont Sharp possibly be right?

At the Michigan plant of Archimedean, Johnny Barefoot appeared for his appointment with Kathy and found her in a state of gloom.

"Don't you see what's happening?" she demanded, facing him across the office which had once been Louis's. "I'm not managing things right at all; everybody knows that. Don't you know that?" Wild-eyed, she stared at him.

"I don't know that," Johnny said. But inside he did know it; she was correct. "Take it easy and sit down," he said. "Harvey and St. Cyr will be here any minute now, and you want to be in command of yourself when you

meet with them." It was a meeting which he had hoped to avoid. But, he had realized, sooner or later it would take place, and so he had let Kathy agree to it.

Kathy said, "I have something terrible to tell you."

"What is it? It can't be so terrible." He set himself, waiting in dread to hear.

"I'm back on drugs, Johnny. All this responsibility and pressure; it's too much for me. I'm sorry." She gazed down at the floor sadly.

"What is the drug?"

"I'd rather not say. It's one of the amphetamines. I've read the literature; I know it can cause a psychosis, in the amounts I'm taking. But I don't care." Panting, she turned away, her back to him. He saw, now, how thin she had gotten. And her face was gaunt, hollow-eyed; he now understood why. The overdosage of amphetamines wasted the body away, turned matter into energy. Her metabolism was altered so that she became, as the addiction returned, a pseudo-hyperthyroid, with all the somatic processes speeded up.

Johnny said, "I'm sorry to hear it." He had been afraid of this. And yet when it had come he had not understood; he had had to wait until she told him. "I think," he said, "you should be under a doctor's care." He wondered where she got the drug. But probably for her, with her years of experience, it was not difficult.

"It makes a person very unstable emotionally," Kathy said. "Given to sudden rages and also crying jags. I want you to know that, so you won't blame me. So you'll understand that it's the drug." She tried to smile; he saw her making the effort.

Going over to her he put his hand on her shoulder. "Listen," he said, "when Harvey and St. Cyr get here, I think you better accept their offer."

“Oh,” she said, nodding. “Well.”

“And then,” he said, “I want you to go voluntarily into a hospital.”

“The cookie factory,” Kathy said bitterly.

“You’d be better off,” he said, “without the responsibility you have, here at Archimedean. What you need is deep, protracted rest. You’re in a state of mental and physical fatigue, but as long as you’re taking that amphetamine —”

“Then it doesn’t catch up with me,” Kathy finished. “Johnny, I can’t sell out to Harvey and St. Cyr.”

“Why not?”

“Louis wouldn’t want me to. He —” She was silent a moment. “He says no.”

Johnny said, “Your health, maybe your life —”

“My sanity, you mean, Johnny.”

“You have too much personally at stake,” he said. “The hell with Louis. The hell with Archimedean; you want to find yourself in a mortuary, too, in half-life? It’s not worth it; it’s just property, and you’re a living creature.”

She smiled. And then, on the desk, a light came on and a buzzer sounded. The receptionist outside said, “Mrs. Sharp, Mr. Harvey and Mr. St. Cyr are here, now. Shall I send them in?”

“Yes,” she answered.

The door opened, and Claude St. Cyr and Phil Harvey came swiftly in. “Hey, Johnny,” St. Cyr said. He seemed to be in a confident mood; beside him, Harvey looked confident, too.

Kathy said, “I’ll let Johnny do most of the talking.”

He glanced at her. *Did that mean she had agreed to sell?* He said, “What kind of deal is this? What do you have to offer in exchange for a controlling interest in Wilhelmina Securities of Delaware? I can’t imagine what it could be.”

“Ganymede,” St. Cyr said. “An entire moon.” He added, “Virtually.”

“Oh yes,” Johnny said. “The USSR land deed. Has it been tested in the international courts?”

“Yes,” St. Cyr said, “and found totally valid. Its worth is beyond estimate. And each year it will increase, perhaps double, in value. My client will put that up. It’s a good offer, Johnny; you and I know each other, and you know when I say it that it’s true.”

Probably it was, Johnny decided. It was in many respects a generous offer; Harvey was not trying to bilk Kathy.

“Speaking for Mrs. Sharp,” Johnny began. But Kathy cut him off.

“No,” she said in a quick, brisk voice. “I can’t sell. He says not to.”

Johnny said, “You’ve already given me authority to negotiate, Kathy.”

“Well,” she said in a hard voice, “I’m taking it back.”

“If I’m to work with you and for you at all,” Johnny said, “you must go on my advice. We’ve already talked it over and agreed —”

The phone in the office rang.

“Listen to him yourself,” Kathy said. She picked up the phone and held it out to Johnny. “He’ll tell you.”

Johnny accepted the phone and put it to his ear. “Who is this?” he demanded. And then he heard the drumming. The far-off uncanny drumming noise, as if something were scratching at a long metal wire.

“… imperative to retain control. Your advice absurd. She can pull herself together; she’s got the stuff. Panic reaction; you’re scared because she’s ill. A good doctor can fix her up. Get a doctor for her; get medical help. Get an attorney and be sure she stays out of the hands of the law. Make sure her supply of drugs is cut. Insist on …” Johnny yanked the receiver away from his ear, refusing to hear more. Trembling, he hung the phone back up.

“You heard him,” Kathy said. “Didn’t you? *That was Louis.*”

“Yes,” Johnny said.

“He’s grown,” Kathy said. “Now we can hear him direct; it’s not just the radio telescope at Kennedy Slough. I heard him last night, clearly, for the first time, as I lay down to go to sleep.”

To St. Cyr and Harvey, Johnny said, “We’ll have to think your proposition over, evidently. We’ll have to get an appraisal of the worth of the unimproved real estate you’re offering and no doubt you want an audit of Wilhelmina. That will take time.” He heard his voice shake; he had not gotten over the shock of picking up the telephone and hearing the living voice of Louis Sarapis.

After making an appointment with St. Cyr and Harvey to meet with them once more later in the day, Johnny took Kathy out to a late breakfast;

she had admitted, reluctantly, that she had eaten nothing since the night before.

"I'm just not hungry," she explained, as she sat picking listlessly at her plate of bacon and eggs, toast with jam.

"Even if that was Louis Sarapis," Johnny said, "you don't —"

"It was. Don't say 'even'; you know it's him. He's gaining power all the time, out there. Perhaps from the sun."

"So it's Louis," he said doggedly. "Nonetheless, you have to act in your own interest, not in his."

"His interests and mine are the same," Kathy said. "They involve maintaining Archimedean."

"Can he give you the help you need? Can he supply what's missing? He doesn't take your drug-addiction seriously; that's obvious. All he did was preach at me." He felt anger. "That's damn little help, for you or for me, in this situation."

"Johnny," she said, "I feel him near me all the time; I don't need the TV or the phone — I *sense* him. It's my mystical bent, I think. My religious intuition; it's helping me maintain contact with him." She sipped a little orange juice.

Bluntly, Johnny said, "It's your amphetamine psychosis, you mean."

"I won't go into the hospital, Johnny. I won't sign myself in; I'm sick but not that sick. I can get over this bout on my own, because I'm not alone. I have my grandfather. And —" She smiled at him. "I have you. In spite of Sarah Belle."

“You won’t have me, Kathy,” he said quietly, “unless you sell to Harvey. Unless you accept the Ganymede real estate.”

“You’d quit?”

“Yes,” he said.

After a pause, Kathy said, “My grandfather says go ahead and quit.” Her eyes were dark, enlarged, and utterly cold.

“I don’t believe he’d say that.”

“Then talk to him.”

“How?”

Kathy pointed to the TV set in the corner of the restaurant. “Turn it on and listen.”

Rising to his feet, Johnny said, “I don’t have to; I’ve already given my decision. I’ll be at my hotel, if you should change your mind.” He walked away from the table, leaving her sitting there. Would she call after him? He listened as he walked. She did not call.

A moment later he was out of the restaurant, standing on the sidewalk. She had called his bluff, and so it ceased to be a bluff; it became the real thing. He actually had quit.

Stunned, he walked aimlessly on. And yet — he had been right. He knew that. It was just that… damn her, he thought. Why didn’t she give in? Because of Louis, he realized. Without the old man she would have gone ahead and done it, traded her controlling, voting stock for the Ganymede property. Damn Louis Sarapis, not her, he thought furiously.

What now? he asked himself. Go back to New York? Look for a new job? For instance approach Alfonse Gam? There was money in that, if he could land it. Or should he stay here in Michigan, hoping that Kathy would change her mind?

She can't keep on, he decided. *No matter what Sarapis tells her. Or rather, what she believes he's telling her. Whichever it is.*

Hailing a cab, he gave the driver the address of his hotel room. A few moments later he was entering the lobby of the Antler Hotel, back where he had started early in the morning. Back to the forbidding empty room, this time merely to sit and wait. To hope that Kathy would change her mind and call him. This time he had no appointment to go to; the appointment was over.

When he reached his hotel room he heard his phone ringing.

For a moment Johnny stood at the door, key in hand, listening to the phone on the other side of the door, the shrill noise reaching him as he stood in the hall. *Is it Kathy?* he wondered. *Or is it* him?

He put the key in the lock, turned it and entered the room; sweeping the receiver off its hook he said, "Hello."

Drumming and far-off, the voice, in the middle of its monotonous monologue, its recitation to itself, was murmuring, "… no good at all, Barefoot, to leave her. Betrayal of your job; thought you understood your responsibilities. Same to her as it was to me, and you never would have walked off in a fit of pique and left me. I deliberately left the disposition of my body to you so you'd stay on. You can't…" At that point Johnny hung up, chilled.

The phone rang again, at once.

This time he did not take it off the hook. *The hell with you,* he said to himself. He walked to the window and stood looking down at the street below, thinking to himself of the conversation he had held with old Louis years ago, the one that had made such an impression in his mind. The conversation in which it had come out that he had failed to go to college because he wanted to die. Looking down at the street below, he thought, *Maybe I ought to jump. At least there'd be no more phones… no more of it.*

The worse part, he thought, *is its* senility. *Its thoughts are not clear, not distinct; they're dreamlike; irrational. The old man is not genuinely alive. He is not even in half-life. This is a dwindling away of consciousness toward a nocturnal state. And we are forced to listen to it as it unwinds, as it develops step by step, to final, total death.*

But even in this degenerative state, it had desires. It *wanted,* and strongly. It wanted him to do something; it wanted Kathy to do something; the remnants of Louis Sarapis were vital and active, and clever enough to find ways of pursuing him, of getting what was wanted. It was a travesty of Louis's wishes during his lifetime, and yet it could not be ignored; it could not be escaped.

The phone continued to ring.

Maybe it isn't Louis, he thought then. *Maybe it's Kathy.* Going to it he lifted the receiver. And put it back down at once. The drumming once more, the fragments of Louis Sarapis's personality… he shuddered. *And is it just here, is it selective?*

He had a terrible feeling that it was *not* selective.

Going to the TV set at the far end of the room he snapped the switch. The screen grew into lighted animation, and yet, he saw, it was strangely blurred. The dim outlines of — it seemed to be a face.

And everyone, he realized, *is seeing this.* He turned to another channel. Again the dully-formed features, the old man half-materialized here on the

television screen. And from the set's speaker the murmur of indistinct words. "…told you time and again your primary responsibility is to…" Johnny shut the set off; the ill-formed face and words sank out of existence, and all that remained, once more, was the ringing phone.

He picked up the phone and said, "Louis, can you hear me?"

"… when election time comes they'll see. A man with the spirit to campaign a second time, take the financial responsibility, after all it's only for the wealthy men, now, the cost of running…" The voice droned on. No, the old man could not hear him. It was not a conversation; it was a monologue. It was not authentic communication.

And yet the old man knew what was occurring on Earth; he seemed to understand, to somehow see, that Johnny had quit his job.

Hanging up the phone he seated himself and lit a cigarette.

I can't go back to Kathy, he realized, *unless I'm willing to change my mind and advise her not to sell. And that's impossible; I can't do that. So that's out. What is there left for me?*

How long can Sarapis hound me? Is there any place I can go?

Going to the window once more he stood looking down at the street below.

At a newsstand, Claude St. Cyr tossed down coins, picked up the newspaper.

"Thank you, sir or madam," the robot vender said.

The lead article… St. Cyr blinked and wondered if he had lost his mind. He could not grasp what he was reading — or rather unable to read. It made no sense; the homeostatic news-printing system, the fully automated micro-

relay newspaper, had evidently broken down. All he found was a procession of words, randomly strung together. It was worse than *Finnegans Wake.*

Or was it random? One paragraph caught his eye.

At the hotel window now ready to leap. If you expect to conduct any more business with her you better get over there. She's dependent on him, needs a man since her husband, that Paul Sharp, abandoned her. The Antler Hotel, room 604. I think you have time. Johnny is too hot-headed; shouldn't have tried to bluff her. With my blood you can't be bluffed and she's got my blood, I…

St. Cyr said rapidly to Harvey, who stood beside him, "Johnny Barefoot's in a room at the Antler Hotel about to jump, and this is old Sarapis telling us, warning us. We better get over there."

Glancing at him, Harvey said, "Barefoot's on our side; we can't afford to have him take his life. But why would Sarapis —"

"Let's just get over there," St. Cyr said, starting toward his parked 'copter. Harvey followed on the run.

IV

All at once the telephone stopped ringing. Johnny turned from the window — and saw Kathy Sharp standing by it, the receiver in her hand. “He called me,” she said. “And he told me, Johnny, where you were and what you were going to do.”

“Nuts,” he said, “I’m not going to do anything.” He moved back from the window.

“He thought you were,” Kathy said.

“Yes, and that proves he can be wrong.” His cigarette, he saw, had burned down to the filter; he dropped it into the ashtray on the dresser and stubbed it out.

“My grandfather was always fond of you,” Kathy said. “He wouldn’t like anything to happen to you.”

Shrugging, Johnny said, “As far as I’m concerned I have nothing to do with Louis Sarapis any more.”

Kathy had put the receiver to her ear; she paid no attention to Johnny — she was listening to her grandfather, he saw, and so he ceased talking. It was futile.

“He says,” Kathy said, “that Claude St. Cyr and Phil Harvey are on their way up here. He told them to come, too.”

“Nice of him,” he said shortly.

Kathy said, “I’m fond of you, too, Johnny. I can see what my grandfather found about you to like and admire. You genuinely take my welfare seriously, don’t you? Maybe I could go into the hospital voluntarily, for a short period anyhow, a week or a few days.”

“Would that be enough?” he asked.

“It might.” She held the phone out to him. “He wants to talk to you. I think you’d better listen; he’ll find a way to reach you, in any case. And you know that.”

Reluctantly, Johnny accepted the phone.

“… trouble is you’re out of a job and that depresses you. If you’re not working you feel you don’t amount to anything; that’s the kind of person you are. I like that. The same way myself. Listen, I’ve got a job for you. At the Convention. Doing publicity to make sure Alfonse Gam is nominated; you’d do a swell job. Call Gam. Call Alfonse Gam. Johnny, call Gam. Call —”

Johnny hung up the phone.

I’ve got a job,” he told Kathy. “Representing Gam. At least Louis says so.”

Would you do that?” Kathy asked. “Be his P.R. man at the nominating convention?”

He shrugged. Why not? Gam had the money; he could and would pay well. And certainly he was no worse than the President, Kent Margrave. *And I must get a job,* Johnny realized. *I have to live. I’ve got a wife and two children; this is no joke.*

“Do you think Gam has a chance this time?” Kathy asked.

“No, not really. But miracles in politics do happen; look at Richard Nixon’s incredible comeback in 1968.”

“What is the best route for Gam to follow?”

He eyed her. “I’ll talk that over with him. Not with you.”

“You’re still angry,” Kathy said quietly. “Because I won’t sell. Listen, Johnny. Suppose I turned Archimedean over to you.”

After a moment he said, “What does Louis say to that?”

“I haven’t asked him.”

“You know he’d say no. I’m too inexperienced. I know the operation, of course; I’ve been with it from the start. But —”

“Don’t sell yourself short,” Kathy said softly.

“Please,” Johnny said. “Don’t lecture me. Let’s try to stay friends; cool, distant *friends.” And if there’s one thing I can’t stand,* he said to himself, *it’s being lectured by a woman. And for my own good.*

The door of the room burst open. Claude St. Cyr and Phil Harvey leaped inside, then saw Kathy, saw him with her, and sagged. “So he got you to come here, too,” St. Cyr said to her, panting for breath.

“Yes,” she said. “He was very concerned about Johnny.” She patted him on the arm. “See how many friends you have? Both warm and cool?”

“Yes,” he said. But for some reason felt deeply, miserably sad.

That afternoon Claude St. Cyr found time to drop by the house of Elektra Harvey, his present employer’s ex-wife.

“Listen, doll,” St. Cyr said, “I’m trying to do good for you in this present deal. If I’m successful —” He put his arms around her and gave her a bear hug. “You’ll recover a little of what you lost. Not all, but enough to make you a trifle happier about life in general.” He kissed her and, as usual, she responded; she squirmed effectively, drew him down to her, pressed close in a manner almost uncannily satisfying. It was very pleasant, and in addition it lasted a long time. And that was *not* usual.

Stirring, moving away from him finally, Elektra said, “By the way, can you tell me what ails the phone and the TV? I can’t call — there always seems to be someone on the line. And the picture on the TV screen; it’s all fuzzy and distorted, and it’s always the same, just a sort of *face.”*

“Don’t worry about it,” Claude said. “We’re working on that right now; we’ve got a crew of men out scouting.” His men were going from mortuary to mortuary; eventually they’d find Louis’s body. And then this nonsense would come to an end… to everyone’s relief.

Going to the sideboard to fix drinks, Elektra Harvey said, “Does Phil know about us?” She measured out bitters into the whiskey glasses, three drops to each.

“No,” St. Cyr said, “and it’s none of his business anyhow.”

“But Phil has a strong prejudice about ex-wives. He wouldn’t like it. He’d get ideas about you being disloyal; since he dislikes me, you’re supposed to, too. That’s what Phil calls ‘integrity’.”

“I’m glad to know that,” St. Cyr said, “but there’s damn little I can do about it. Anyhow, he isn’t going to find out.”

“I can’t help being worried, though,” Elektra said, bringing him his drink. “I was tuning the TV, you see, and — I know this sounds crazy, but it actually seemed to me —” She broke off. “Well, I actually thought I heard the TV announcer mention us. But he was sort of mumbling, or the

reception was bad. But anyhow I did hear that, your name and mine." She looked soberly up at him, while absent-mindedly rearranging the strap of her dress.

Chilled, he said, "Dear, it's ridiculous." Going over to the TV set he clicked it on.

Good Lord, he thought. *Is Louis Sarapis* everywhere? *Does he see everything we do from that locus of his out there in deep space?*

It was not exactly a comforting thought, especially since he was trying to involve Louis's granddaughter in a business deal which the old man disapproved of.

He's getting back at me, St. Cyr realized as he reflexively tuned the television set with numbed fingers.

Alfonse Gam said, "As a matter of fact, Mr. Barefoot, I intended to call you. I have a wire from Mr. Sarapis advising me to employ you. I do think, however, we'll have to come up with something entirely new. Margrave has a considerable advantage over us."

"True," Johnny admitted. "But let's be realistic; we're going to get help this time. Help from Louis Sarapis."

"Louis helped last time," Gam pointed out, "and it wasn't sufficient."

"But his help now will be on a different order." *After all,* Johnny thought, *the old man controls all the communication media, the newspapers, radio and TV, even the telephones, God forbid.* With such power Louis could do almost anything he chose.

He hardly needs me, he thought caustically. But he did not say that to Alfonse Gam; apparently Gam did not understand about Louis and what Louis could do. And after all, a job was a job.

“Have you turned on a TV set lately?” Gam asked. “Or tried to use the phone, or even bought a newspaper? There’s nothing but a sort of decaying gibberish coming out. If that’s Louis, he’s not going to be much help at the Convention. He’s — disjointed. Just rambles.”

“I know,” Johnny said guardedly.

“I’m afraid whatever scheme Louis had for his half-life period has gone wrong,” Gam said. He looked morose; he did not look like a man who expected to win an election. “Your admiration for Louis is certainly greater than mine, at this stage,” Gam said. “Frankly, Mr. Barefoot, I had a long talk with Mr. St. Cyr, and his concepts were totally discouraging. I’m determined to press on, but frankly —” He gestured. “Claude St. Cyr told me to my face I’m a loser.”

“You’re going to believe St. Cyr? He’s on the other side, now, with Phil Harvey.” Johnny was astonished to find the man so naive, so pliable.

“I told him I was going to win,” Gam murmured. “But honest to God, this drivel from every TV set and phone — it’s awful. It discourages me; I want to get as far away from it as possible.”

Presently Johnny said, “I understand.”

“Louis didn’t use to be like that,” Gam said plaintively. “He just drones on, now. Even if he can swing the nomination to me… do I want it? I’m tired, Mr. Barefoot. Very tired.” He was silent, then.

“If you’re asking me to give you pep,” Johnny said, “you’ve got the wrong man.” The voice from the phone and the TV affected him much the same way. Much too much for him to say anything encouraging to Gam.

“You’re in P.R.,” Gam said. “Can’t you generate enthusiasm where there is none? Convince me, Barefoot, and then I’ll convince the world.” From

his pocket he brought a folded-up telegram. “This is what came from Louis, the other day. Evidently he can interfere with the telegraph lines as well as the other media.” He passed it over and Johnny read it.

“Louis was more coherent then,” Johnny said. “When he wrote this.”

“That’s what I mean! He’s deteriorating rapidly. When the Convention begins — and it’s only one more day, now — what’ll he be like? I sense something dreadful, here. And I don’t care to get mixed up in it.” He added, “And yet I want to run. So Barefoot — you deal with Louis for me; you can be the go-between.” He added, “The psychopomp.”

“What’s that mean?”

“The go-between God and man,” Gam said.

Johnny said, “If you use words like that you won’t get the nomination; I can promise you that.”

Smiling wryly, Gam said, “How about a drink?” He started from his living room, toward the kitchen. “Scotch? Bourbon?”

“Bourbon,” Johnny said.

“What do you think of the girl, Louis’s granddaughter?”

“I like her,” he said. And that was true; he certainly did.

“Even though she’s a psychotic, a drug addict, been in jail and on top of that a religious nut?”

“Yes,” Johnny said tightly.

“I think you’re crazy,” Gam said, returning with the drinks. “But I agree with you. She’s a good person. I’ve known her for some time, as a matter of fact. Frankly, I don’t know why she took the bent that she has. I’m not a psychologist… probably though it has something to do with Louis. She has a peculiar sort of devotion to him, a kind of loyalty that’s both infantile and fanatic. And, to me, touchingly sweet.”

Sipping his drink, Johnny said, “This is terrible bourbon.”

“Old Sir Muskrat,” Gam said, grimacing. “I agree.”

“You better serve a better drink,” Johnny said, “or you really are through in politics.”

“That’s why I need you,” Gam said. “You see?”

“I see,” Johnny said, carrying his drink into the kitchen to pour it back in the bottle — and to take a look at the Scotch instead.

“How are you going about getting me elected?” Alfonse Gam asked.

Johnny said, “I think our best approach, our only approach, is to make use of the sentimentality people feel about Louis’s death. I saw the lines of mourners; it was impressive, Alfonse. Day after day they came. When he was alive, many persons feared him, feared his power. But now they can breathe easier; he’s gone, and the frightening aspects of —”

Gam interrupted. “But Johnny, he’s not gone; that’s the whole point. You know that gibbering *thing* on the phones and on TV — that’s him!”

“But they don’t know it,” Johnny said. “The public is baffled — just as the first person to pick it up was baffled. That technician at Kennedy Slough.” Emphatically, he said, “Why should they connect an electrical emanation one light-week away from Earth with Louis Sarapis?”

After a moment Gam said, “I think you’re making an error, Johnny. But Louis said to hire you, and I’m going to. And you have a free hand; I’ll depend on your expertise.”

“Thanks,” Johnny said. “You can depend on me.” But inside, he was not so sure. *Maybe the public is smarter than I realize,* he thought. *Maybe I’m making a mistake.* But what other approach was there? None that he could dream up; either they made use of Gam’s tie with Louis or they had absolutely nothing by which to recommend him.

A slender thread on which to base the campaign for nomination — and only a day before the Convention convened. He did not like it.

The telephone in Gam’s living room rang.

“That’s probably him,” Gam said. “You want to talk to him? To be truthful, I’m afraid to take it off the hook.”

“Let it ring,” Johnny said. He agreed with Gam; it was just too damn unpleasant.

“But we can’t evade him,” Gam pointed out. “If he wants to get in touch with us; if it isn’t the phone it’s the newspaper. And yesterday I tried to use my electric typewriter… instead of the letter I intended to compose I got the same mishmash — I got a text from *him.”*

Neither of them moved to take the phone, however. They let it ring on.

“Do you want an advance?” Gam asked. “Some cash?”

“I’d appreciate it,” Johnny said. “Since today I quit my job with Archimedean.”

Reaching into his coat for his wallet, Gam said, “I’ll give you a check.” He eyed Johnny. “You like her but you can’t work with her; is that it?”

“That’s it,” Johnny said. He did not elaborate, and Gam did not press him any further. Gam was, if nothing else, gentlemanly. And Johnny appreciated it.

As the check changed hands the phone stopped ringing.

Was there a link between the two? Johnny wondered. Or was it just chance? No way to tell. Louis seemed to know everything… anyhow, this was what Louis had wanted; he had told both of them that.

“I guess we did the right thing,” Gam said tartly. “Listen, Johnny. I hope you can get back on good terms with Kathy Egmont Sharp. For her sake; she needs help. Lots of it.”

Johnny grunted.

“Now that you’re not working for her, make one more try,” Gam said. “Okay?”

“I’ll think about it,” Johnny said.

“She’s a very sick girl, and she’s got a lot of responsibility now. You know that, too. Whatever caused the rift between you — try to come to some kind of understanding *before it’s too late*. That’s the only proper way.”

Johnny said nothing. But he knew, inside him, that Gam was right.

And yet — how did he do it? He didn’t know how. *How to you approach a psychotic person?* he wondered. *How do you repair such a deep rift?* It was hard enough in regular situations… and this had so many overtones.

If nothing else, this had Louis mixed in it. And Kathy’s feelings about Louis. Those would have to change. The blind adoration — that would have

to cease.

“What does your wife think of her?” Gam asked.

Startled, he said, “Sarah Belle? She’s never met Kathy.” He added, “Why do you ask?”

Gam eyed him and said nothing.

“Damn odd question,” Johnny said.

“Damn odd girl, that Kathy,” Gam said. “Odder than you think, my friend. There’s a lot you don’t know.” He did not elaborate.

To Claude St. Cyr, Phil Harvey said, “There’s something I want to know. Something we must have the answer to, or we’ll never get control of the voting stock of Wilhelmina. *Where’s the body?”*

“We’re looking,” St. Cyr said patiently. “We’re trying all of the mortuaries, one by one. But money’s involved; undoubtedly someone’s paying them to keep quiet, and if we want them to talk —”

“That girl,” Harvey said, “is going on instructions from beyond the grave. Despite the fact that Louis is devolving… she still pays attention to him. It’s — unnatural.” He shook his head, repelled.

“I agree,” St. Cyr said. “In fact, you expressed it perfectly. This morning when I was shaving I picked him up on the TV.” He shuddered visibly. “I mean, it’s coming at us from every side, now.”

“Today,” Harvey said, “is the first day of the Convention.” He looked out of the window, at the cars and people. “Louis’s attention will be tied up there, trying to swing the vote onto Alfonse Gam. That’s where Johnny is, working for Gam — that was Louis’s idea. Now perhaps we can operate

with more success. Do you see? Maybe he's forgotten about Kathy; my God, he can't watch everything at once."

St. Cyr said quietly, "But Kathy is not at Archimedean now."

"Where is she, then? In Delaware? At Wilhelmina Securities? It ought to be easy to find her."

"She's sick," St. Cyr said. "In a hospital, Phil. She was admitted during the late evening, last night. For her drug addiction, I presume."

There was silence.

"You know a lot," Harvey said finally. "Where'd you learn this, anyhow?"

"From listening to the phone and the TV. But I don't know where the hospital is. It could even be off Earth, on Luna or on Mars, even back where she came from. I got the impression she's extremely ill. Johnny's abandoning her set her back greatly." He gazed at his employer somberly. "That's all I know, Phil."

"Do you think Johnny Barefoot knows where she is?"

"I doubt it."

Pondering, Harvey said, "I'll bet she tries to call him. I'll bet he either knows or will know, soon. If we only could manage to put a snoop-circuit on his phone… get his calls routed through here."

"But the phones," St. Cyr said wearily. "All it is now — just the gibberish. The interference from Louis." He wondered what became of Archimedean Enterprises if Kathy was declared unable to manage her affairs, if she was forcibly committed. Very complicated, depending on whether Earth law or —

Harvey was saying, “We can’t find her and we can’t find the body. And meanwhile the Convention’s on, and they’ll nominate that wretched Gam, that creature of Louis’s. And next we know, he’ll be President.” He eyed St. Cyr with antagonism. “So far you haven’t done me much good, Claude.”

“We’ll try all the hospitals. But there’s tens of thousands of them. And if it isn’t in this area it could be anywhere.” He felt helpless. *Around and around we go,* he thought, *and we get nowhere.*

Well, we can keep monitoring the TV, he decided. *That’s some help.*

“I’m going to the Convention,” Harvey announced. “I’ll see you later. If you should come up with something — which I doubt — you can get in touch with me there.” He strode to the door, and a moment later St. Cyr found himself alone.

Doggone it, St. Cyr said to himself. *What’ll I do now? Maybe I ought to go to the Convention, too.* But there was one more mortuary he wanted to check; his men had been there, but he also wanted to give it a try personally. It was just the sort that Louis would have liked, run by an unctuous individual named, revoltingly, Herbert Schoenheit von Vogelsang, which meant, in German, Herbert Beauty of the Bird’s Song — a fitting name for a man who ran the Beloved Brethren Mortuary in downtown Los Angeles, with branches in Chicago and New York and Cleveland.

When he reached the mortuary, Claude St. Cyr demanded to see Schoenheit von Vogelsang personally. The place was doing a rush business; Resurrection Day was just around the corner and the petite bourgeoisie, who flocked in great numbers to just such ceremonies, were lined up waiting to retrieve their half-lifer relatives.

“Yes sir,” Schoenheit von Vogelsang said, when at last he appeared at the counter in the mortuary’s business office. “You asked to speak to me.”

St. Cyr laid his business card down on the counter; the card still described him as legal consultant for Archimedean Enterprises. “I am Claude St. Cyr,” he declared. “You may have heard of me.”

Glancing at the card, Schoenheit von Vogelsang blanched and mumbled, “I give you my word, Mr. St. Cyr, we’re trying, we’re really trying. We’ve spent out of our own funds over a thousand dollars in trying to make contact with him; we’ve had high-gain equipment flown in from Japan where it was developed and made. And still no results.” Tremulously, he backed away from the counter. “You can come and see for yourself. Frankly, I believe someone’s doing it on purpose; a complete failure like this can’t occur naturally, if you see what I mean.”

St. Cyr said, “Let me see him.”

“Certainly.” The mortuary owner, pale and agitated, led the way through the building into the chill bin, until, at last, St. Cyr saw ahead the casket which had lain in state, the casket of Louis Sarapis. “Are you planning any sort of litigation?” the mortuary owner asked fearfully. “I assure you, we —”

“I’m here,” St. Cyr stated, “merely to take the body. Have your men load it onto a truck for me.”

“Yes, Mr. St. Cyr,” Herb Schoenheit von Vogelsang said in meek obedience; he waved two mortuary employees over and began giving them instructions. “Do you have a truck with you, Mr. St. Cyr?” he asked.

“You may provide it,” St. Cyr said, in a forbidding voice.

Shortly, the body in its casket was loaded onto a mortuary truck, and the driver turned to St. Cyr for instructions.

St. Cyr gave him Phil Harvey’s address.

“And the litigation,” Herb Schoenheit von Vogelsang was murmuring, as St. Cyr boarded the truck to sit beside the driver. “You don’t infer malpractice on our part, do you, Mr. St. Cyr? Because if you do —”

“The affair is closed as far as we’re concerned,” St. Cyr said to him laconically, and signaled the driver to drive off.

As soon as they left the mortuary, St. Cyr began to laugh.

“What strikes you so funny?” the mortuary driver asked.

“Nothing,” St. Cyr said, still chuckling.

When the body in its casket, still deep in its original quick-pack, had been left off at Harvey’s home and the driver had departed, St. Cyr picked up the telephone and dialed. But he found himself unable to get through to the Convention Hall. All he heard, for his trouble, was the weird distant drumming, the monotonous litany of Louis Sarapis — he hung up, disgusted but at the same time grimly determined.

We’ve had enough of that, St. Cyr said to himself. / *won’t wait for Harvey’s approval; I don’t need it.*

Searching the living room he found, in a desk drawer, a heat gun. Pointing it at the casket of Louis Sarapis he pressed the trigger.

The envelope of quick-pack steamed up, the casket itself fizzed as the plastic melted. Within, the body blackened, shriveled, charred away at last into a baked, coal-like clinker, small and nondescript.

Satisfied, St. Cyr returned the heat gun to the desk drawer.

Once more he picked up the phone and dialed.

In his ear the monotonous voice intoned, "… no one but Gam can do it; Gam's the man what am — good slogan for you, Johnny. Gam's the man what am; remember that. I'll do the talking. Give me the mike and I'll tell them; Gam's the man what am. Gam's —"

Claude St. Cyr slammed down the phone, turned to the blackened deposit that had been Louis Sarapis; he gaped mutely at what he could not comprehend. The voice, when St. Cyr turned on the television set, emanated from that, too, just as it had been doing; nothing had changed.

The voice of Louis Sarapis was not originating in the body. Because the body was gone. There simply was no connection between them.

Seating himself in a chair, Claude St. Cyr got out his cigarettes and shakily lit up, trying to understand what this meant. It seemed almost as if he had it, almost had the explanation.

But not quite.

V

By monorail — he had left his ‘copter at the Beloved Brethren Mortuary — Claude St. Cyr numbly made his way to Convention Hall. The place, of course, was packed; the noise was terrible. But he managed to obtain the services of a robot page; over the public address system, Phil Harvey’s presence was requested in one of the side rooms used as meeting places by delegations wishing to caucus in secret.

Harvey appeared, disheveled from shoving through the dense pack of spectators and delegates. “What is it, Claude?” he asked, and then he saw his attorney’s face. “You better tell me,” he said quietly.

St. Cyr blurted, “The voice we hear. It isn’t Louis! It’s someone else trying to sound like Louis!”

“How do you know?”

He told him.

Nodding, Harvey said, “And it definitely was Louis’s body you destroyed; there was no deceit there at the mortuary — you’re positive of that.”

“I’m not positive,” St. Cyr said. “But I think it was; I believe it now and I believed it at the time.” It was too late to find out now, in any case, not enough remained of the body for such an analysis to be successfully made.

“But who could it be, then?” Harvey said. “My God, it’s coming to us from beyond the solar system — could it be nonterrestrials of some kind? Some sort of echo or mockery, a non-living reaction unfamiliar to us? An inert process without intent?”

St. Cyr laughed. “You’re babbling, Phil. Cut it out.”

Nodding, Harvey said, “Whatever you say, Claude. If you think it’s someone here —”

“I don’t know,” St. Cyr said candidly. “But I’d guess it’s someone right on this planet, someone who knew Louis well enough to have introjected his characteristics sufficiently thoroughly to imitate them.” He was silent, then. That was as far as he could carry his logical processes… beyond that he saw nothing. It was a blank, and a frightening one at that.

There is, he thought, *an element of the deranged in it. What we took to be decay — it’s more a form of madness than degeneration. Or is madness itself degeneration?* He did not know; he wasn’t trained in the field of psychiatry, except regarding its legal aspects. And the legal aspects had no application, here.

“Has anyone nominated Gam yet?” he asked Harvey.

“Not yet. It’s expected to come sometime today, though. There’s a delegate from Montana who’ll do it, the rumor is.”

“Johnny Barefoot is here?”

“Yes.” Harvey nodded. “Busy as can be, lining up delegates. In and out of the different delegations, very much in evidence. No sign of Gam, of course. He won’t come in until the end of the nominating speech and then of course all hell will break loose. Cheering and parading and waving banners… the Gam supporters are all prepared.”

“Any indication of —” St. Cyr hesitated. “What we’ve assumed to be Louis? His presence?” *Or its presence,* he thought. *Whatever it is.*

“None as yet,” Harvey said.

“I think we’ll hear from it,” St. Cyr said. “Before the day is over.”

Harvey nodded; he thought so, too.

“Are you afraid of it?” St. Cyr asked.

“Sure,” Harvey said. “A thousand times more so than ever, now that we don’t even know who or what it is.”

“You’re right to take that attitude,” St. Cyr said. He felt the same way.

“Perhaps we should tell Johnny,” Harvey said.

St. Cyr said, “Let him find out on his own.”

“All right, Claude,” Harvey said. “Anything you say. After all, it was you who finally found Louis’s body; I have complete faith in you.”

In a way, St. Cyr thought, *I wish I hadn’t found it. I wish I didn ‘t know what I know now; we were better off believing it was old Louis talking to us from every phone, newspaper and TV set.*

That was bad — but this is far worse. Although, he thought, *it seems to me that the answer is there, somewhere, just waiting.*

I must try, he told himself. *Try to get it. TRY!*

Off by himself in a side room, Johnny Barefoot tensely watched the events of the Convention on closed-circuit TV. The distortion, the invading presence from one light-week away, had cleared for a time, and he could see and hear the delegate from Montana delivering the nominating speech for Alfonse Gam.

He felt tired. The whole process of the Convention, its speeches and parades, its tautness, grated on his nerves, ran contrary to his disposition. *So damn much show,* he thought. Display for what? If Gam wanted to gain the nomination he could get it, and all the rest of this was purposeless. His own thoughts were on Kathy Egmont Sharp.

He had not seen her since her departure for U.C. Hospital in San Francisco. At this point he had no idea of her condition, whether she had responded to therapy or not.

The deep intuition could not be evaded that she had not. How sick really was Kathy? Probably very sick, with or without drugs; he felt that strongly. Perhaps she would never be discharged from U.C. Hospital; he could imagine that.

On the other hand — if she wanted out, he decided, *she would find a way to get out.* That he intuited, too, even more strongly.

So it was up to her. She had committed herself, gone into the hospital voluntarily. And she would come out — if she ever did — the same way. No one could compel Kathy… she was simply not that sort of person. And that, he realized, could well be a symptom of the illness-process.

The door to the room opened. He glanced up from the TV screen. And saw Claude St. Cyr standing in the entrance. St. Cyr held a heat gun in his hand, pointed at Johnny. He said, “Where’s Kathy?”

“I don’t know,” Johnny said. He got slowly, warily, to his feet.

“You do. I’ll kill you if you don’t tell me.”

“Why?” he said, wondering what had brought St. Cyr to this point, this extreme behavior.

St. Cyr said, “Is it on Earth?” Still holding the gun pointed at Johnny he came toward him.

“Yes,” Johnny said, with reluctance.

“Give me the name of the city.”

“What are you going to do?” Johnny said. “This isn’t like you, Claude; you used to always work within the law.”

St. Cyr said, “I think the voice is Kathy. I know it’s not Louis, now; we have that to go on but beyond that it’s just a guess. *Kathy is the only one I know deranged enough, deteriorated enough.* Give me the name of the hospital.”

“The only way you could know it isn’t Louis,” Johnny said, “would be to destroy the body.”

“That’s right,” St. Cyr said, nodding.

Then you have, Johnny realized. *You found the correct mortuary; you got to Herb Schoenheit van Vogehang.* So that was that.

The door to the room burst open again; a group of cheering delegates, Gam supporters, marched in, blowing horns and hurling streamers, carrying huge hand-painted placards. St. Cyr turned toward them, waving his gun at them — and Johnny Barefoot sprinted past the delegates, to the door and out into the corridor.

He ran down the corridor and a moment later emerged at the great central hall in which Gam’s demonstration was in full swing. From the loudspeakers mounted at the ceiling a voice boomed over and over.

“Vote for Gam, the man what am. Gam, Gam, vote for Gam, vote for Gam, the one fine man; vote for Gam who really am. Gam, Gam, Gam, he

really am —”

Kathy, he thought. *It can’t be you; it just can’t.* He ran on, out of the hall, squeezing past the dancing, delirious delegates, past the glazed-eyed men and women in their funny hats, their banners wiggling… he reached the street, the parked ‘copters and cars, throngs of people clustered about, trying to push inside.

If it is you, he thought, *then you’re too sick ever to come back. Even if you want to, will yourself to. Had you been waiting for Louis to die, is that it? Do you hate us? Or are you afraid of us? What explains what it is you’re doing… what’s the reason for it?*

He hailed a ‘copter marked TAXI. “To San Francisco,” he instructed the driver.

Maybe you’re not conscious that you’re doing it, he thought. *Maybe it’s an autonomous process, rising out of your unconscious mind. Your mind split into two portions, one on the surface which we see, the other one —*

The one we hear.

Should we feel sorry for you? he wondered. *Or should we hate you, fear you? HOW MUCH HARM CAN YOU DO? I guess that’s the real issue. I love you,* he thought. *In some fashion, at least. I care about you, and that’s a form of love, not such as I feel toward my wife or my children, but it is a concern. Damn it,* he thought, *this is dreadful. Maybe St. Cyr is wrong; maybe it isn’t you.*

The ‘copter swept upward into the sky, cleared the buildings and turned west, its blade spinning at peak velocity.

On the ground, standing in front of the convention hall, St. Cyr and Phil Harvey watched the ‘copter go.

“Well, so it worked,” St. Cyr said. “I got him started moving. I’d guess he’s on his way either to Los Angeles or to San Francisco.”

A second ‘copter slid up before them, hailed by Phil Harvey; the two men entered it and Harvey said, “You see the taxi that just took off? Stay behind it, just within sight. But don’t let it catch a glimpse of you if you can help it.”

“Heck,” the driver said, “If I can see it, it can see me.” But he clicked on his meter and began to ascend. Grumpily, he said to Harvey and St. Cyr, “I don’t like this kind of stuff; it can be dangerous.”

“Turn on your radio,” St. Cyr told him. “If you want to hear something that’s dangerous.”

“Aw hell,” the driver said, disgusted. “The radio don’t work; some kind of interference, like sun spots or maybe some amateur operator — I lost a lot of fares because the dispatcher can’t get hold of me. I think the police ought to do something about it, don’t you?”

St. Cyr said nothing. Beside him, Harvey peered at the ‘copter ahead.

When he reached U.C. Hospital at San Francisco, and had landed at the field on the main building’s roof, Johnny saw the second ship circling, not passing on, and he knew that he was right; he had been followed all the way. But he did not care. It didn’t matter.

Descending by means of the stairs, he came out on the third floor and approached a nurse. “Mrs. Sharp,” he said. “Where is she?”

“You’ll have to ask at the desk,” the nurse said. “And visiting hours aren’t until —”

He rushed on until he found the desk.

“Mrs. Sharp’s room is 309,” the bespectacled, elderly nurse at the desk said. “But you must have Doctor Gross’s permission to visit her. And I

believe Doctor Gross is having lunch right now and probably won't be back until two o'clock, if you'd care to wait." She pointed to a waiting room.

"Thanks," he said. "I'll wait." He passed through the waiting room and out the door at the far end, down the corridor, watching the numbers on the doors until he saw room number 309. Opening the door he entered the room, shut the door after him and looked around for her.

There was the bed, but it was empty.

"Kathy," he said.

At the window, in her robe, she turned, her face sly, bound up by hatred; her lips moved and, staring at him, she said with loathing, "I want Gam because he am." Spitting at him, she crept toward him, her hands raised, her fingers writhing. "Gam's a man, a *real man,"* she whispered, and he saw, in her eyes, the dissolved remnants of her personality expire even as he stood there. "Gam, gam, gam," she whispered, and slapped him.

He retreated. "It's you," he said. "Claude St. Cyr was right. Okay. I'll go." He fumbled for the door behind him, trying to get it open. Panic passed through him, like a wind, then; he wanted nothing but to get away. "Kathy," he said, "let go." Her nails had dug into him, into his shoulder, and she hung onto him, peering sideways into his face, smiling at him.

"You're dead," she said. "Go away. I smell you, the dead inside you."

"I'll go," he said, and managed to find the handle of the door. She let go of him, then; he saw her right hand flash up, the nails directed at his face, possibly his eyes — he ducked, and her blow missed him. "I want to get away," he said, covering his face with his arms.

Kathy whispered, "I am Gam, I am. I'm the only one who am. Am alive. Gam, alive." She laughed. "Yes, I will," she said, mimicking his voice perfectly. "Claude St. Cyr was right; okay, I'll go. I'll go. I'll go." She was

now between him and the door. “The window,” she said. “Do it now, what you wanted to do when I stopped you.” She hurried toward him, and he retreated, backward, step by step, until he felt the wall behind him.

“It’s all in your mind,” he said, “this hate. Everyone is fond of you; I am, Gam is, St. Cyr and Harvey are. What’s the point of this?”

“The point,” Kathy said, “is that I show you what you’re really like. Don’t you know yet? You’re even worse than me. I’m just being honest.”

“Why did you pretend to be Louis?” he said.

“I am Louis,” Kathy said. “When he died he didn’t go into half-life because I ate him; he became me. I was waiting for that. Alfonse and I had it all worked out, the transmitter out there with the recorded tape ready — we frightened you, didn’t we? You’re all scared, too scared to stand in his way. He’ll be nominated; he’s been nominated already, I feel it, I know it.”

“Not yet,” Johnny said.

“But it won’t be long,” Kathy said. “And I’ll be his wife.” She smiled at him. “And you’ll be dead, you and the others.” Coming at him she chanted, “I am Gam, I am Louis and when you’re dead I’ll be you, Johnny Barefoot, and all the rest; I’ll eat you all.” She opened her mouth wide and he saw the sharp, jagged, pale-as-death teeth.

“And rule over the dead,” Johnny said, and hit her with all his strength, on the side of her face, near the jaw. She spun backward, fell, and then at once was up and rushing at him. Before she could catch him he sprinted away, to one side, caught then a glimpse of her distorted, shredded features, ruined by the force of his blow — and then the door to the room opened, and St. Cyr and Phil Harvey, with two nurses, stood there. Kathy stopped. He stopped, too. “Come on, Barefoot,” St. Cyr said, jerking his head. Johnny crossed the room and joined them.

Tying the sash of her robe, Kathy said matter-of-factly, “So it was planned; he was to kill me, Johnny was to. And the rest of you would all stand and watch and enjoy it.”

“They have an immense transmitter out there,” Johnny said. “They placed it a long time ago, possibly years back. All this time they’ve been waiting for Louis to die; maybe they even killed him, finally. The idea’s to get Gam nominated and elected, while keeping everyone terrorized with that transmission. She’s sick, much sicker than we realized, even sicker than *you* realized. Most of all it was under the surface where it didn’t show.”

St. Cyr shrugged. “Well, she’ll have to be certified.” He was calm but unusually slow-spoken. “The will named me as trustee; I can represent the estate against her, file the commitment papers and then come forth at the sanity hearing.”

“I’ll demand a jury trial,” Kathy said. “I can convince a jury of my sanity; it’s actually quite easy and I’ve been through it before.”

“Possibly,” St. Cyr said. “But anyhow the transmitter will be gone; by that time the authorities will be out there.”

“It’ll take months to reach it,” Kathy said. “Even by the fastest ship. And by then the election will be over; Alfonse will be President.”

St. Cyr glanced at Johnny Barefoot. “Maybe so,” he murmured.

“That’s why we put it out so far,” Kathy said. “It was Alfonse’s money and my ability; I inherited Louis’s ability, you see. I can do anything. Nothing is impossible for me if I want it; all I have to do is want it *enough.”*

“You wanted me to jump,” Johnny said. “And I didn’t.”

“You would have,” Kathy said, “in another minute. If they hadn’t come in.” She seemed quite poised, now. “You will, eventually; I’ll keep after you. And there’s no place you can hide; you know I’ll follow you and find you. All three of you.” Her gaze swept from one of them to the next, taking them all in.

Harvey said, “I’ve got a little power and wealth, too. I think we can defeat Gam, even if he’s nominated.”

“You have power,” Kathy said, “but not imagination. What you have isn’t enough. Not against me.” She spoke quietly, with complete confidence.

“Let’s go,” Johnny said, and started down the hall, away from room 309 and Kathy Egmont Sharp.

Up and down San Francisco’s hilly streets Johnny walked, hands in his pockets, ignoring the buildings and people, seeing nothing, merely walking on and on. Afternoon faded, became evening; the lights of the city came on and he ignored that, too. He walked block after block until his feet ached, burned, until he became aware that he was very hungry — that it was now ten o’clock at night and he had not eaten anything since morning. He stopped, then, and looked around him.

Where were Claude St. Cyr and Phil Harvey? He could not remember having parted from them; he did not even remember leaving the hospital. But Kathy; he remembered that. He could not forget it even if he wanted to. And he did not want to. It was too important ever to be forgotten, by any of them who had witnessed it, understood it.

At a newsstand he saw the massive, thick-black headlines.

GAM WINS NOMINATION, PROMISES BATTLING CAMPAIGN

FOR NOVEMBER ELECTION

So she did get that, Johnny thought. *They did, the two of them; they got what they're after exactly. And now — all they have to do is defeat Kent Margrave. And that thing out there, a light-week away; it's still yammering. And will be for months.*

They'll win, he realized.

At a drugstore he found a phone booth; entering it he put money into the slot and dialed Sarah Belle, his own home phone number.

The phone clicked in his ear. And then the familiar monotonous voice chanted, "Gam in November, Gam in November; win with Gam, President Alfonse Gam, our man — I am for Gam. *I am for Gam. For GAM!"* He rang off, then, and left the phone booth. It was hopeless.

At the counter of the drugstore he ordered a sandwich and coffee; he sat eating mechanically, filling the requirements of his body without pleasure or desire, eating by reflex until the food was gone and it was time to pay the bill. *What can I do?* he asked himself. *What can anyone do? All the means of communication are gone; the media have been taken over.* They *have the radio, TV, newspapers, phone, wire services… everything that depends on microwave transmission or open-gap electric circuitry. They've captured it all, left nothing for us, the opposition, by which to fight back.*

Defeat, he thought. *That's the dreary reality that lies ahead for us. And then, when they enter office, it'll be our-death.*

"That'll be a dollar ten," the counter girl said.

He paid for his meal and left the drugstore.

When a 'copter marked TAXI came spiralingby, he hailed it.

"Take me home," he said.

“Okay,” the driver said amiably. “Where is home, buddy?”

He gave him the address in Chicago and then settled back for the long ride. He was giving up; he was quitting, going back to Sarah Belle, to his wife and children. The fight — for him — apparently was over.

When she saw him standing in the doorway, Sarah Belle said, “Good God, Johnny — you look terrible.” She kissed him, led him inside, into the warm, familiar living room. “I thought you’d be out celebrating.”

“Celebrating?” he said hoarsely.

“Your man won the nomination.” She went to put the coffee pot on for him.

“Oh yeah,” he said, nodding. “That’s right. I was his P.R. man; I forgot.”

“Better lie down,” Sarah Belle said. “Johnny, I’ve never seen you look so beaten; I can’t understand it. What happened to you?”

He sat down on the couch and lit a cigarette.

“What can I do for you?” she asked, with anxiety.

“Nothing,” he said.

“Is that Louis Sarapis on all the TV and phones? It sounds like him. I was talking with the Nelsons and they said it’s Louis’s exact voice.”

“No,” he said. “It’s not Louis. Louis is dead.”

“But his period of half-life —”

“No,” he said. “He’s dead. Forget about it.”

“You know who the Nelsons are, don’t you? They’re the new people who moved into the apartment that —”

“I don’t want to talk,” he said. “Or be talked at.”

Sarah Belle was silent, for a minute. And then she said, “One thing they said — you won’t like to hear it, I guess. The Nelsons are plain, quite commonplace people… they said even if Alfonse Gam got the nomination they wouldn’t vote for him. They just don’t like him.”

He grunted.

“Does that made you feel bad?” Sarah Belle asked. “I think they’re reacting to the pressure, Louis’s pressure on the TV and phones; they just don’t care for it. I think you’ve been excessive in your campaign, Johnny.” She glanced at him hesitantly. “That’s the truth; I have to say it.”

Rising to his feet, he said, “I’m going to visit Phil Harvey. I’ll be back later on.”

She watched him go out the door, her eyes darkened with concern.

When he was admitted to Phil Harvey’s house he found Phil and Gertrude Harvey and Claude St. Cyr sitting together in the living room, each with a glass in hand, but no one speaking. Harvey glanced up briefly, saw him, and then looked away.

“Are we going to give up?” he asked Harvey.

Harvey said, “I’m in touch with Kent Margrave. We’re going to try to knock out the transmitter. But it’s a million to one shot, at that distance. And with even the fastest missile it’ll take a month.”

“But that’s at least something,” Johnny said. It would at least be before the election; it would give them several weeks in which to campaign. “Does Margrave understand the situation?”

“Yes,” Claude St. Cyr said. “We told him virtually everything.”

“But that’s not enough,” Phil Harvey said. “There’s one more thing we must do. You want to be in on it? Draw for the shortest match?” He pointed to the coffee table; on it Johnny saw three matches, one of them broken in half. Now Phil Harvey added a fourth match, a whole one.

St. Cyr said, “Her first. Her right away, as soon as possible. And then later on if necessary, Alfonse Gam.”

Weary, cold fright filled Johnny Barefoot.

“Take a match,” Harvey said, picking up the four matches, arranging and rearranging them in his hand and then holding out the four even tops to the people in the room. “Go ahead, Johnny. You got here last so I’ll have you go first.”

“Not me,” he said.

“Then we’ll draw without you,” Gertrude Harvey said, and picked a match. Phil held the remaining ones out to St. Cyr and he drew one also. Two remained in Phil Harvey’s hand.

“I was in love with her,” Johnny said. “I still am.”

Nodding, Phil Harvey said, “Yes, I know.”

His heart leaden, Johnny said, “Okay. I’ll draw.” Reaching, he selected one of the two matches.

It was the broken one.

“I got it,” he said. “It’s me.”

“Can you do it?” Claude St. Cyr asked him.

He was silent for a time. And then he shrugged and said, “Sure. I can do it. Why not?” *Why not indeed?* he asked himself. *A woman that I was falling in love with; certainly I can murder her. Because it has to be done. There is no other way out for us.*

“It may not be as difficult as we think,” St. Cyr said. “We’ve consulted some of Phil’s technicians and we picked up some interesting advice. Most of their transmissions are coming from nearby, not a light-week away by any means. I’ll tell you how we know. Their transmissions have kept up with changing events. For example, your suicide-attempt at the Antler Hotel. *There was no time-lapse there or anywhere else!’*

“And they’re not supernatural, Johnny,” Gertrude Harvey said.

“So the first thing to do,” St. Cyr continued, “is to find their base here on Earth or at least here in the solar system. It could be Gam’s guinea fowl ranch on Io. Try there, if you find she’s left the hospital.”

“Okay,” Johnny said, nodding slightly.

“How about a drink?” Phil Harvey said to him.

Johnny nodded.

The four of them, seated in a circle, drank, slowly and in silence.

“Do you have a gun?” St. Cyr asked.

“Yes.” Rising to his feet he set his glass down.

“Good luck,” Gertrude said, after him.

Johnny opened the front door and stepped outside alone, out into the dark, cold evening.

Orpheus With Clay Feet

At the offices of Concord Military Service Consultants, Jesse Slade looked through the window at the street below and saw everything denied him in the way of freedom, flowers and grass, the opportunity for a long and unencumbered walk into new places. He sighed.

"Sorry, sir," the client opposite his desk mumbled apologetically. "I guess I'm boring you."

"Not at all," Slade said, reawakening to his onerous duties. "Let's see…" He examined the papers which the client, a Mr. Walter Grossbein, had presented to him. "Now you feel, Mr. Grossbein, that your most favorable chance to elude military service lies in the area of a chronic ear-trouble deemed by civilian doctors in the past *acute labyrinthitis.* Hmmm." Slade studied the pertinent documents.

His duties — and he did not enjoy them — lay in locating for clients of the firm a way out of military service. The war against the Things had not been conducted properly, of late; many casualties from the Proxima region had been reported — and with the reports had come a rush of business for Concord Military Service Consultants.

"Mr. Grossbein," Slade said thoughtfully, "I noticed when you entered my office that you tended to list to one side."

"Did I?" Mr. Grossbein asked, surprised.

"Yes, and I thought to myself, That man has a severe impairment of his sense of balance. That's related to the ear, you know, Mr. Grossbein. Hearing, from an evolutionary standpoint, is an outgrowth of the sense of balance. Some water creatures of a low order incorporate a grain of sand

and make use of it as a drop-weight within their fluid body, and by that method tell if they're going up or down."

Mr. Grossbein said, "I believe I understand."

"Say it, then," Jesse Slade said.

"I — frequently list to one side or another as I walk."

"And at night?"

Mr. Grossbein frowned, and then said happily, "I, uh, find it almost impossible to orient myself at night, in the dark, when I can't see."

"Fine," Jesse Slade said, and begin writing on the client's military service form B-30. "I think this will get you an exemption," he said.

Happily, the client said, "I can't thank you enough."

Oh yes you can, Jesse Slade thought to himself. You can thank us to the tune of fifty dollars. After all, without us you might be a pale, lifeless corpse in some gully on a distant planet, not far from now.

And, thinking about distant planets, Jesse Slade felt once more the yearning. The need to escape from his small office and the process of dealing with gold-bricking clients whom he had to face, day after day.

There must be another life than this, Slade said to himself. Can this really be all there is to existence?

Far down the street outside his office window a neon sign glowed night and day. Muse Enterprises, the sign read, and Jesse Slade knew what it meant. I'm going in there, he said to himself. Today. When I'm on my ten-thirty coffee break; I won't even wait for lunch time.

As he put on his coat, Mr. Hnatt, his supervisor, entered the office and said, “Say, Slade, what’s up? Why the fierce trapped look?”

“Um, I’m getting out, Mr. Hnatt,” Slade told him. “Escaping. I’ve told fifteen thousand men how to escape military service; now it’s my turn.”

Mr. Hnatt clapped him on the back. “Good idea, Slade; you’re overworked. Take a vacation. Take a time-travel adventure to some distant civilization — it’ll do you good.”

“Thanks, Mr. Hnatt,” Slade said, “I’ll do just that.” And left his office as fast as his feet would carry him, out of the building and down the street to the glowing neon sign of Muse Enterprises.

The girl behind the counter, blonde-haired, with dark green eyes and a figure that impressed him more for its engineering aspects, its suspension so to speak, smiled at him and said, “Our Mr. Manville will see you in a moment, Mr. Slade. Please be seated. You’ll find authentic nineteenth century *Harper’s Weeklies* over on the table, there.” She added, “And some twentieth century *Mad Comics,* those great classics of lampoonery equal to Hogarth.”

Tensely, Mr. Slade seated himself and tried to read; he found an article in *Harper’s Weekly* telling that the Panama Canal was impossible and had already been abandoned by its French designers — that held his attention for a moment (the reasoning was so logical, so convincing) but after a few moments his old ennui and restlessness, like a chronic fog, returned. Rising to his feet he once more approached the desk.

“Mr. Manville isn’t here yet?” he asked hopefully.

From behind him a male voice said, “You, there at the counter.”

Slade turned. And found himself facing a tall, dark-haired man with an intense expression, eyes blazing.

“You,” the man said, “are in the *wrong century.*”

Slade gulped.

Striding toward him, the dark-haired man said, “I am Manville, sir.” He held out his hand and they shook. “You must go away,” Manville said. “Do you understand, sir? As soon as possible.”

“But I want to use your services,” Slade mumbled.

Manville’s eyes flashed. “I mean away into the past. What’s your name?” He gestured emphatically. “Wait, it’s coming to me. Jesse Slade, of Concord, up the street, there.”

“Right,” Slade said, impressed.

“All right, now down to business,” Mr. Manville said. “Into my office.” To the exceptionally-constructed girl at the counter he said, “No one is to disturb us, Miss Frib.”

“Yes, Mr. Manville,” Miss Frib said. “I’ll see to that, don’t you fear, sir.”

“I know that, Miss Frib.” Mr. Manville ushered Slade into a well-furnished inner office. Old maps and prints decorated the walls; the furniture — Slade gaped. Early American, with wood pegs instead of nails. New England maple and worth a fortune.

“Is it all right…” he began.

“Yes, you may actually sit on that Directorate chair,” Mr. Manville told him. “But be careful; it scoots out from under you if you lean forward. We keep meaning to put rubber casters on it or some such thing.” He looked irritated now, at having to discuss such trifles. “Mr. Slade,” he said

brusquely, “I’ll speak plainly; obviously you’re a man of high intellect and we can skip the customary circumlocutions.”

“Yes,” Slade said, “please do.”

“Our time-travel arrangements are of a specific nature; hence the name ‘Muse.’ Do you grasp the meaning, here?”

“Urn,” Slade said, at a loss but trying. “Let’s see. A muse is an organism that functions to —”

“That inspires,” Mr. Manville broke in impatiently. “Slade, you are — let’s face it — not a creative man. That’s why you feel bored and unfulfilled. Do you paint? Compose? Make welded iron sculpture out of spaceship bodies and discarded lawn chairs? You don’t. You do nothing; you’re utterly passive. Correct?”

Slade nodded. “You’ve hit it, Mr. Manville.”

“I’ve hit nothing,” Mr. Manville said irritably. “You don’t follow me, Slade. Nothing will make you creative because you don’t have it within you. You’re too ordinary. I’m not going to get you started finger-painting or basket-weaving; I’m no Jungian analyst who believes art is the answer.” Leaning back he pointed his finger at Slade. “Look, Slade. We can help you, but you must be willing to help yourself first. Since you’re not creative, the best you can hope for — and we can assist you here — *is to inspire others who are creative.* Do you see?”

After a moment Slade said, “I see, Mr. Manville. I do.”

“Right,” Manville said, nodding. “Now, you can inspire a famous musician, like Mozart or Beethoven, or a scientist such as Albert Einstein, or a sculptor such as Sir Jacob Epstein — any one of a number of people, writers, musicians, poets. You could, for example, meet Sir Edward Gibbon during his travels to the Mediterranean and fall into a casual conversation

with him and say something to this order… Hmmm, look at the ruins of this ancient civilization all around us. I wonder, how does a mighty empire such as Rome come to fall into decay? Fall into ruin… fall apart…”

“Good Lord,” Slade said fervently, “I see, Manville; I get it. I repeat the word ‘fall’ over and over again to Gibbon, and due to me he gets the idea of his great history of Rome, the *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire.* And —” He felt himself tremble. “I helped.”

” ‘Helped’?” Manville said. “Slade, that’s hardly the word. Without you there would have been no such work. You, Slade, could be Sir Edward’s muse.” He leaned back, got out an Upmann cigar, circa 1915, and lit up.

“I think,” Slade said, “I’d like to mull this over. I want to be sure I inspire the proper person; I mean, they all deserve to be inspired, but —”

“But you want to find *the* person in terms of your own psychic needs,” Manville agreed, puffing fragrant blue smoke. “Take our brochure.” He passed a large shiny multi-color 3-D pop-up booklet to Slade. “Take this home, read it, and come back to us when you’re ready.”

Slade said, “God bless you, Mr. Manville.”

“And calm down,” Manville said. “The world isn’t going to end… we know that here at Muse because we’ve looked.” He smiled, and Slade managed to smile back.

Two days later Jesse Slade returned to Muse Enterprises. “Mr. Manville,” he said, “I know whom I want to inspire.” He took a deep breath. “I’ve thought and thought and what would mean to the most to me would be if I could go back to Vienna and inspire Ludwig van Beethoven with the idea for the Choral Symphony, you know, that theme in the fourth movement that the baritone sings that goes bum-bum de-da de-da bum-bum, daughters of Elysium; you know.” He flushed. “I’m no musician, but all my life I’ve admired the Beethoven Ninth and especially —

“It’s been done,” Manville said.

“Eh?” He did not understand.

“It’s been taken, Mr. Slade.” Manville looked impatient as he sat at his great oak rolltop desk, circa 1910. Bringing out a thick metal-staved black binder he turned the pages. “Two years ago a Mrs. Ruby Welch of Montpelier, Idaho went back to Vienna and inspired Beethoven with the theme for the choral movement of his Ninth.” Manville slammed the binder shut and regarded Slade. “Well? What’s your second choice?”

Stammering, Slade said, “I’d — have to think. Give me time.”

Examining his watch, Manville said shortly, “I’ll give you two hours. Until three this afternoon. Good day, Slade.” He rose to his feet, and Slade automatically rose, too.

An hour later, in his cramped office at Concord Military Service Consultants, Jesse Slade realized in a flashing single instant who and what he wanted to inspire. At once he put on his coat, excused himself to sympathetic Mr. Hnatt, and hurried down the street to Muse Enterprises.

“Well, Mr. Slade,” Manville said, seeing him enter. “Back so soon. Come into the office.” He strode ahead, leading the way. “All right, let’s have it.” He shut the door after the two of them.

Jesse Slade licked his dry lips and then, coughing, said, “Mr. Manville, I want to go back and inspire — well, let me explain. You know the great science fiction of the golden age, between 1930 and 1970?”

“Yes, yes,” Manville said impatiently, scowling as he listened.

“When I was in college,” Slade said, “getting my M.A. in English lit, I had to read a good deal of twentieth century science fiction, of course. Of the greats there were three writers who stood out. The first was Robert

Heinlein with his future history. The second, Isaac Asimov with his Foundation epic series. And —" He took a deep, shuddering breath. "The man I did my paper on. Jack Dowland. Of the three of them, Dowland was considered the greatest. His future history of the world began to appear in 1957, in both magazine form — as short stories — and in book form, as complete novels. By 1963, Dowland was regarded as —"

Mr. Manville said, "Hmmm." Getting out the black binder, he began to thumb through it. "Twentieth century science fiction… a rather specialized interest — fortunately for you. Let's see."

"I hope," Slade said quietly, "it hasn't been taken."

"Here is one client," Mr. Manville said. "Leo Parks of Vacaville, California. He went back and inspired A. E. van Vogt to avoid love stories and westerns and try science fiction." Turning more pages, Mr. Manville said, "And last year a client of Muse Enterprises, Miss Julie Oxenblut of Kansas City, Kansas asked to be permitted to inspire Robert Heinlein in his future history… was it Heinlein you said, Mr. Slade?"

"No," Slade said, "it was Jack Dowland, the greatest of the three. Heinlein was great, but I did much research on this, Mr. Manville, and Dowland was greater."

"No, it hasn't been done," Manville decided, closing up the black binder. From his desk drawer he brought out a form. "You fill this out, Mr. Slade," he said, "and then we'll begin to roll on this matter. Do you know the year and the place at which Jack Dowland began work on his future history of the world?"

"I do," Slade said. "He was living in a little town on the then Route 40 in Nevada, a town called Purpleblossom, consisted of three gas stations, a cafe, a bar, and a general store. Dowland had moved there to get atmosphere; he wanted to write stories of the Old West in the form of TV scripts. He hoped to make a good deal of money."

“I see you know your subject,” Manville said, impressed.

Slade continued, “While living in Purpleblossom he did write a number of TV western scripts but somehow he found them unsatisfactory. In any case, he remained there, trying other fields such as children’s books and articles on teenage pre-marital sex for the slick magazines of the times… and then, all at once, in the year 1956, he suddenly turned to science fiction and immediately produced the greatest novelette seen to date in that field. That was the consensus gentium of the time, Mr. Manville, and I have read the story and I agree. It was called THE FATHER ON THE WALL and it still appears in anthologies now and then; it’s the kind of story that will never die. And the magazine in which it appeared, *Fantasy & Science Fiction,* will always be remembered for having published Dowland’s first epic in its August 1957 issue.”

Nodding, Mr. Manville said, “And this is the magnus opus which you wish to inspire. This, and all that followed.”

“You have it right, sir,” Mr. Slade said.

“Fill out your form,” Manville said, “and we’ll do the rest.” He smiled at Slade and Slade, confident, smiled back.

The operator of the time-ship, a short, heavyset, crew-cut young man with strong features, said briskly to Slade, “Okay, bud; you ready or not? Make up your mind.”

Slade, for one last time, inspected his twentieth century suit which Muse Enterprises had provided him — one of the services for the rather high fee which he had found himself paying. Narrow necktie, cuffless trousers, and Ivy League striped shirt… yes, Slade decided, from what he knew of the period it was authentic, right down to the sharp-pointed Italian shoes and the colorful stretch socks. He would pass without any difficulty as a citizen of the U.S. of 1956, even in Purpleblossom, Nevada.

“Now listen,” the operator said, as he fastened the safety belt around Slade’s middle, “you got to remember a couple of things. First of all, the only way you can get back to 2040 is with me; you can’t *walk* back. And second, you got to be careful not to change the past — I mean, stick to your one simple task of inspiring this individual, this Jack Dowland, *and let it go at that.”*

“Of course,” Slade said, puzzled at the admonition.

“Too many clients,” the operator said, “you’d be surprised how many, go wild when they get back into the past; they get delusions of power and want to make all sorts of changes — eliminate wars, hunger and poverty — you know. Change history.”

“I won’t do that,” Slade said. “I have no interest in abstract cosmic ventures on that order.” To him, inspiring Jack Dowland was cosmic enough. And yet he could empathize enough to understand the temptation. In his own work he had seen all kinds of people.

The operator slammed shut the hatch of the time-ship, made certain that Slade was strapped in properly, and then took his own seat at the controls. He snapped a switch and a moment later Slade was on his way to his vacation from monotonous office work — back to 1956 and the nearest he would come to a creative act in his life.

The hot midday Nevada sun beat down, blinding him; Slade squinted, peered about nervously for the town of Purpleblossom. All he saw was dull rock and sand, the open desert with a single narrow road passing among the Joshua plants.

“To the right,” the operator of the time-ship said, pointing. “You can walk there in ten minutes. You understand your contract, I hope. Better get it out and read it.”

From the breast pocket of his 1950-style coat, Slade brought the long yellow contract form with Muse Enterprises. “It says you’ll give me thirty-six hours. That you’ll pick me up in this spot and that it’s my responsibility to be here; if I’m not, and can’t be brought back to my own time, the company is not liable.”

“Right,” the operator said, and reentered the time-ship. “Good luck, Mr. Slade. Or, as I should call you, Jack Dowland’s muse.” He grinned, half in derision, half in friendly sympathy, and then the hatch shut after him.

Jesse Slade was alone on the Nevada desert, a quarter mile outside the tiny town of Purpleblossom.

He began to walk, perspiring, wiping his neck with his handkerchief.

There was no problem to locating Jack Dowland’s house, since only seven houses existed in the town. Slade stepped up onto the rickety wooden porch, glancing at the yard with its trash can, clothes line, discarded plumbing fixtures… parked in the driveway he saw a dilapidated car of some archaic sort — archaic even for the year 1956.

He rang the bell, adjusted his tie nervously, and once more in his mind rehearsed what he intended to say. At this point in his life, Jack Dowland had written no science fiction; that was important to remember — it was in fact the entire point. This was the critical nexus in his life — history, this fateful ringing of his doorbell. Of course Dowland did not know that. What was he doing within the house? Writing? Reading the funnies of a Reno newspaper? Sleeping?

Footsteps. Tautly, Slade prepared himself.

The door opened. A young woman wearing light-weight cotton trousers, her hair tied back with a ribbon, surveyed him calmly. What small, pretty feet she had, Slade noticed. She wore slippers; her skin was smooth and shiny, and he found himself gazing intently, unaccustomed to seeing so much of a woman exposed. Both ankles were completely bare.

“Yes?” the woman asked pleasantly but a trifle wearily. He saw now that she had been *vacuuming;* there in the living room was a tank type G.E. vacuum cleaner… its existence here proving that historians were wrong; the tank type cleaner had *not* vanished in 1950 as was thought.

Slade, thoroughly prepared, said smoothly, “Mrs. Dowland?” The woman nodded. Now a small child appeared to peep at him past its mother. “I’m a fan of your husband’s monumental —” Oops, he thought, that wasn’t right. “Ahem,” he corrected himself, using a twentieth century expression often found in books of that period. “Tsk-tsk,” he said. “What I mean to say is this, madam. I know well the works of your husband Jack. I am here by means of a lengthy drive across the desert badlands to observe him in his habitat.” He smiled hopefully.

“You know Jack’s work?” She seemed surprised, but thoroughly pleased.

“On the telly,” Slade said. “Fine scripts of his.” He nodded.

“You’re English, are you?” Mrs. Dowland said. “Well, did you want to come in?” She held the door wide. “Jack is working right now up in the attic… the children’s noise bothers him. But I know he’d like to stop and talk to you, especially since you drove so far. You’re Mr. —”

“Slade,” Slade said. “Nice abode you possess, here.”

“Thank you.” She led the way into a dark, cool kitchen in the center of which he saw a round plastic table with wax milk carton, melmac plate, sugar bowl, two coffee cups and other amusing objects thereon. “JACK!” she called at the foot of a flight of stairs. “THERE’S A FAN OF YOURS HERE; HE WANTS TO SEE YOU!”

Far off above them a door opened. The sound of a person’s steps, and then, as Slade stood rigidly, Jack Dowland appeared, young and good-looking, with slightly-thinning brown hair, wearing a sweater and slacks,

his lean, intelligent face beclouded with a frown. “I’m at work,” he said curtly. “Even though I do it at home it’s a job like any other.” He gazed at Slade. “What do you want? What do you mean you’re a ‘fan’ of my work? What work? Christ, it’s been two months since I sold anything; I’m about ready to go out of my mind.”

Slade said, “Jack Dowland, that is because you have yet to find your proper genre.” He heard his voice tremble; this was the moment.

“Would you like a beer, Mr. Slade?” Mrs. Dowland asked.

“Thank you, miss,” Slade said. “Jack Dowland,” he said, “I am here to inspire you.”

“Where are you from?” Dowland said suspiciously. “And how come you’re wearing your tie that funny way?”

“Funny in what respect?” Slade asked, feeling nervous.

“With the knot at the bottom instead of up around your adam’s apple.” Dowland walked around him, now, studying him critically. “And why’s your head shaved? You’re too young to be bald.”

“The custom of this period,” Slade said feebly. “Demands a shaved head. At least in New York.”

“Shaved head my ass,” Dowland said. “Say, what are you, some kind of a crank? What do you want?”

“I want to praise you,” Slade said. He felt angry now; a new emotion, indignation, filled him — he was not being treated properly and he knew it.

“Jack Dowland,” he said, stuttering a little, “I know more about your work than you do; I know your proper genre is science fiction and not

television westerns. Better listen to me; I'm your muse." He was silent, then, breathing noisily and with difficulty.

Dowland stared at him, and then threw back his head and laughed.

Also smiling, Mrs. Dowland said, "Well, I knew Jack had a muse but I assumed it was female. Aren't all muses female?"

"No," Slade said angrily. "Leon Parks of Vacaville, California, who inspired A. E. van Vogt, was male." He seated himself at the plastic table, his legs being too wobbly, now, to support him. "Listen to me, Jack Dowland —"

"For God's sake," Dowland said, "either call me Jack or Dowland but not both; it's not natural the way you're talking. Are you on tea or something?" He sniffed intently.

"Tea," Slade echoed, not understanding. "No, just a beer, please."

Dowland said, "Well get to the point. I'm anxious to be back at work. Even if it's done at home it *is* work."

It was now time for Slade to deliver his encomium. He had prepared it carefully; clearing his throat he began. "Jack, if I may call you that, I wonder why the hell you haven't tried science fiction. I figure that —"

"I'll tell you why," Jack Dowland broke in. He paced back and forth, his hands in his trousers pockets. "Because there's going to be a hydrogen war. The future's black. Who wants to write about it? Keeerist." He shook his head. "And anyhow who reads that stuff? Adolescents with skin trouble. Misfits. And it's junk. Name me one good science fiction story, just one. I picked up a magazine on a bus once when I was in Utah. Trash! I wouldn't write that trash even if it paid well, and I looked into it and it doesn't pay well — around one half cent a word. And who can live on that?" Disgustedly, he started toward the stairs. "I'm going back to work."

“Wait,” Slade said, feeling desperate. All was going wrong. “Hear me out, JackDowland.”

“There you go with that funny talk again,” Dowland said. But he paused, waiting. “Well?” he demanded.

Slade said, “Mr. Dowland, I am from the future.” He was not supposed to say that — Mr. Manville had warned him severely — but it seemed at the moment to be the only way out for him, the only thing that would stop Jack Dowland from walking off.

“What?” Dowland said loudly. “The *what?”*

“I am a time-traveler,” Slade said feebly, and was silent.

Dowland walked back toward him.

When he arrived at the time-ship, Slade found the short-set operator seated on the ground before it, reading a newspaper. The operator glanced up, grinned and said, “Back safe and sound, Mr. Slade. Come on, let’s go.” He opened the hatch and guided Slade within.

“Take me back,” Slade said. “Just take me back.”

“What’s the matter? Didn’t you enjoy your inspiring?”

“I just want to go back to my own time,” Slade said.

“Okay,” the operator said, raising an eyebrow. He strapped Slade into his seat and then took his own beside him.

When they reached Muse Enterprises, Mr. Manville was waiting for them. “Slade,” he said, “come inside.” His face was dark. “I have a few words to say to you.”

When they were alone in Manville's office, Slade began, "He was in a bad mood, Mr. Manville. Don't blame me." He hung his head, feeling empty and futile.

"You —" Manville stared down at him in disbelief. "*You failed* to inspire him! That's never happened before!"

"Maybe I can go back again," Slade said.

"My God," Manville said, "you not only didn't inspire him — you turned him *against* science fiction."

"How did you find this out?" Slade said. He had hoped to keep it quiet, make it his own secret to carry with him to the grave.

Manville said bitingly, "All I had to do was keep my eye on the reference books dealing with literature of the twentieth century. Half an hour after you left, the entire texts on Jack Dowland, including the half-page devoted to his biography in the Britannica — vanished."

Slade said nothing; he stared at the floor.

"So I researched it," Manville said. "I had the computers at the University of California look up all extant citations on Jack Dowland."

"Were there any?" Slade mumbled.

"Yes," Manville said. "There were a couple. Minute, in rarified technical articles dealing comprehensively and exhaustively with that period. Because of you, Jack Dowland is now completely unknown to the public — *and was so even during his own day."* He waved a finger at Slade, panting with wrath. "Because of you, Jack Dowland never wrote his epic future history of mankind. Because of your so-called 'inspiration' he

continued to write scripts for TV westerns — and died at forty-six an utterly anonymous hack."

"No science fiction at *all?"* Slade asked, incredulous. Had he done that badly? He couldn't believe it; true, Dowland had bitterly repulsed every suggestion Slade had made — true, he had gone back up to his attic in a peculiar frame of mind after Slade had made his point. But —

"All right," Manville said, "there exists *one* science fiction work by Jack Dowland. Tiny, mediocre and totally unknown." Reaching into his desk drawer he grabbed out a yellowed, ancient magazine which he tossed to Slade. "One short story called ORPHEUS WITH CLAY FEET, under the pen name Philip K. Dick. Nobody read it then, nobody reads it now — it was an account of a visit to Dowland by —" He glared furiously at Slade. "By a well-intentioned idiot from the future with deranged visions of *inspiring him* to write a mythological history of the world to come. Well, Slade? What do you say?"

Slade said heavily, "He used my visit as the basis for the story. Obviously."

"And it made him the only money he ever earned as a science fiction writer — dissapointingly little, barely enough to justify his effort and time. You're in the story, I'm in the story — Lord, Slade, you must have told him everything."

"I did," Slade said. "To convince him."

"Well, he wasn't convinced; he thought you were a nut of some kind. He wrote the story obviously in a bitter frame of mind. Let me ask you this: was he busy working when you arrived?"

"Yes," Slade said, "but Mrs. Dowland said —"

"There is — was — no Mrs. Dowland! Dowland never married! That must have been a neighbor's wife whom Dowland was having an affair

with. No wonder he was furious; you broke in on his assignation with that girl, whoever she was. She's in the story, too; he put everything in and then gave up his house in Purpleblossom, Nevada and moved to Dodge City, Kansas." There was silence.

"Um," Slade said at last, "well, could I try again? With someone else? I was thinking on the way back about Paul Ehrlich and his magic bullet, his discovery of the cure for —"

"Listen," Manville said. "I've been thinking, too. You're going back but not to inspire Doctor Ehrlich or Beethoven or Dowland or anybody like that, anybody useful to society."

With dread, Slade glanced up.

"You're going back," Manville said between his teeth, "to *uninspire* people like Adolf Hitler and Karl Marx and Sanrome Clinger —"

"You mean you think I'm so ineffectual…" Slade mumbled.

"Exactly. We'll start with Hitler in his period of imprisonment after his first abortive attempt to seize power in Bavaria. The period in which he dictated *Mein Kampf to* Rudolf Hess. I've discussed this with my superiors and it's all worked out; you'll be there as a fellow prisoner, you understand? And you'll recommend to Adolf Hitler, just as you recommended to Jack Dowland, that he write. In this case, a detailed autobiography laying out in detail his political program for the world. And if everything goes right —"

"I understand," Slade murmured, staring at the floor again. "It's a — I'd say an inspired idea, but I'm afraid I've given onus to that word by now."

"Don't credit me with the idea," Manville said. "I got it out of Dowland's wretched story, ORPHEUS WITH CLAY FEET; that's how he resolved it at the end." He turned the pages of the ancient magazine until he came to the part he wanted. "Read that, Slade. You'll find that it carries you

up to your encounter with me, and then you go off to do research on the Nazi Party so that you can best uninspire Adolf Hitler not to write his autobiography and hence possibly prevent World War Two. And if you fail to uninspire Hitler, we'll try you on Stalin, and if you fail to uninspire Stalin, then —"

"All right," Slade muttered, "I understand; you don't have to spell it out to me."

"And you'll do it," Manville said, "because in ORPHEUS WITH CLAY FEET you agree. So it's all decided already."

Slade nodded. "Anything. To make amends."

To him Manville said, "You idiot. How could you have done so badly?"

"It was an off-day for me," Slade said. "I'm sure I could do better the next time." Maybe with Hitler, he thought. Maybe I can do a terrific job of uninspiring him, better than anyone else ever did in uninspiring anyone in history.

"We'll call you the null-muse," Manville said.

"Clever idea," Slade said.

Wearily, Manville said, "Don't compliment me; compliment Jack Dowland. It was in his story, too. At the very last."

"And that's how it ends?" Slade asked.

"No," Manville said, "it ends with me presenting you with a bill — the costs of sending you back to uninspire Adolf Hitler. Five hundred dollars, in advance." He held out his hand. "Just in case you never get back here."

Resignedly, in misery, Jesse Slade reached as slowly as possible into his twentieth century coat pocket for his wallet.

The Days of Perky Pat

At ten in the morning a terrific horn, familiar to him, hooted Sam Regan out of his sleep, and he cursed the careboy upstairs; he knew the racket was deliberate. The careboy, circling, wanted to be certain that flukers — and not merely wild animals — got the care parcels that were to be dropped.

We'll get them, we'll get them, Sam Regan said to himself as he zipped his dust-proof overalls, put his feet into boots and then grumpily sauntered as slowly as possible toward the ramp. Several other flukers joined him, all showing similar irritation.

"He's early today," Tod Morrison complained. "And I'll bet it's all staples, sugar and flour and lard — nothing interesting like say candy."

"We ought to be grateful," Norman Schein said.

"Grateful!" Tod halted to stare at him. "GRATEFUL?"

"Yes," Schein said. "What do you think we'd be eating without them: If they hadn't seen the clouds ten years ago."

"Well," Tod said sullenly, "I just don't like them to come *early;* I actually don't exactly mind their coming, as such."

As he put his shoulders against the lid at the top of the ramp, Schein said genially, "That's mighty tolerant of you, Tod boy. I'm sure the careboys would be pleased to hear your sentiments."

Of the three of them, Sam Regan was the last to reach the surface; he did not like the upstairs at all, and he did not care who knew it. And anyhow, no one could compel him to leave the safety of the Pinole Fluke-

pit; it was entirely his business, and he noted now that a number of his fellow flukers had elected to remain below in their quarters, confident that those who did answer the horn would bring them back something.

"It's bright," Tod murmured, blinking in the sun.

The care ship sparkled close overhead, set against the gray sky as if hanging from an uneasy thread. Good pilot, this drop, Tod decided. He, or rather *it*, just lazily handles it, in no hurry. Tod waved at the care ship, and once more the huge horn burst out its din, making him clap his hands to his ears. Hey, a joke's a joke, he said to himself. And then the horn ceased; the careboy had relented.

"Wave to him to drop," Norm Schein said to Tod. "You've got the wigwag."

"Sure," Tod said, and began laboriously flapping the red flag, which the Martian creatures had long ago provided, back and forth, back and forth.

A projectile slid from the underpart of the ship, tossed out stabilizers, spiraled toward the ground.

"Sheoot," Sam Regan said with disgust. "It is staples; they don't have the parachute." He turned away, not interested.

How miserable the upstairs looked today, he thought as he surveyed the scene surrounding him. There, to the right, the uncompleted house which someone — not far from their pit — had begun to build out of lumber salvaged from Vallejo, ten miles to the north. Animals or radiation dust had gotten the builder, and so his work remained where it was; it would never be put to use. And, Sam Regan saw, an unusually heavy precipitate had formed since last he had been up here, Thursday morning or perhaps Friday; he had lost exact track. The darn dust, he thought. Just rocks, pieces of rubble, and the dust. World's becoming a dusty object with no one to whisk it off regularly. How about you? he asked silently of the Martian

careboy flying in slow circles overhead. Isn't your technology limitless? Can't you appear some morning with a dust rag a million miles in surface area and restore our planet to pristine newness?

Or rather, he thought, to pristine *oldness*, the way it was in the "ol-days," as the children call it. We'd like that. While you're looking for something to give to us in the way of further aid, try that.

The careboy circled once more, searching for signs of writing in the dust: a message from the flukers below. I'll write that, Sam thought. BRING DUST RAG, RESTORE OUR CIVILIZATION. Okay, careboy?

All at once the care ship shot off, no doubt on its way back home to its base on Luna or perhaps all the way to Mars.

From the open fluke-pit hole, up which the three of them had come, a further head poked, a woman. Jean Regan, Sam's wife, appeared, shielded by a bonnet against the gray, blinding sun, frowning and saying, "Anything important? Anything *new?"*

" 'Fraid not," Sam said. The care parcel projectile had landed and he walked toward it, scuffing his boots in the dust. The hull of the projectile had cracked open from the impact and he could see the canisters already. It looked to be five thousand pounds of salt — might as well leave it up here so the animals wouldn't starve, he decided. He felt despondent.

How peculiarly anxious the careboys were. Concerned all the time that the mainstays of existence be ferried from their own planet to Earth. They must think we eat all day long, Sam thought. My God… the pit was filled to capacity with stored foods. But of course it had been one of the smallest public shelters in Northern California.

"Hey," Schein said, stooping down by the projectile and peering into the crack opened along its side. "I believe I see something we can use." He found a rusted metal pole — once it had helped reinforce the concrete side of an ol-days public building — and poked at the projectile, stirring its

release mechanism into action. The mechanism, triggered off, popped the rear half of the projectile open… and there lay the contents.

"Looks like radios in that box," Tod said. "Transistor radios." Thoughtfully stroking his short black beard he said, "Maybe we can use them for something new in our layouts."

"Mine's already got a radio," Schein pointed out.

"Well, build an electronic self-directing lawn mower with the parts," Tod said. "You don't have that, do you?" He knew the Scheins' Perky Pat layout fairly well; the two couples, he and his wife with Schein and his, had played together a good deal, being almost evenly matched.

Sam Regan said, "Dibs on the radios, because I can use them." His layout lacked the automatic garage-door opener that both Schein and Tod had; he was considerably behind them.

"Let's get to work," Schein agreed. "We'll leave the staples here and just cart back the radios. If anybody wants the staples, let them come here and get them. Before the do-cats do."

Nodding, the other two men fell to the job of carting the useful contents of the projectile to the entrance of their fluke-pit ramp. For use in their precious, elaborate Perky Pat layouts.

Seated cross-legged with his whetstone, Timothy Schein, ten years old and aware of his many responsibilities, sharpened his knife, slowly and expertly. Meanwhile, disturbing him, his mother and father noisily quarreled with Mr. and Mrs. Morrison, on the far side of the partition. They were playing Perky Pat again. As usual.

How many times today they have to play that dumb game? Timothy asked himself. Forever, I guess. He could see nothing in it, but his parents played on anyhow. And they weren't the only ones; he knew from what

other kids said, even from other fluke-pits, that their parents, too, played Perky Pat most of the day, and sometimes even on into the night.

His mother said loudly, “Perky Pat’s going to the grocery store and it’s got one of those electric eyes that opens the door. Look.” A pause. “See, it opened for her, and now she’s inside.”

“She pushes a cart,” Timothy’s dad added, in support.

“No, she doesn’t,” Mrs. Morrison contradicted. “That’s wrong. She gives her list to the grocer and he fills it.”

“That’s only in little neighborhood stores,” his mother explained. “And this is a supermarket, you can tell because of the electric eye door.”

“I’m sure all grocery stores had electric eye doors,” Mrs. Morrison said stubbornly, and her husband chimed in with his agreement. Now the voices rose in anger; another squabble had broken out. As usual.

Aw, cung to them, Timothy said to himself, using the strongest word which he and his friends knew. What’s a supermarket anyhow? He tested the blade of his knife — he had made it himself, originally, out of a heavy metal pan — and then hopped to his feet. A moment later he had sprinted silently down the hall and was rapping his special rap on the door of the Chamberlains’ quarters.

Fred, also ten years old, answered. “Hi. Ready to go? I see you got that old knife of yours sharpened; what do you think we’ll catch?”

“Not a do-cat,” Timothy said. “A lot better than that; I’m tired of eating do-cat. Too peppery.”

“Your parents playing Perky Pat?”

“Yeah.”

Fred said, “My mom and dad have been gone for a long time, off playing with the Benteleys.” He glanced sideways at Timothy, and in an instant they had shared their mute disappointment regarding their parents. Gosh, and maybe the darn game was all over the world, by now; that would not have surprised either of them.

“How come your parents play it?” Timothy asked.

“Same reason yours do,” Fred said.

Hesitating, Timothy said, “Well, why? I don’t know why they do; I’m asking you, can’t you say?”

“It’s because —” Fred broke off. “Ask them. Come on; let’s get upstairs and start hunting.” His eyes shone. “Let’s see what we can catch and kill today.”

Shortly, they had ascended the ramp, popped open the lid, and were crouching amidst the dust and rocks, searching the horizon. Timothy’s heart pounded; this moment always overwhelmed him, the first instant of reaching the upstairs. The thrilling initial sight of the expanse. Because it was never the same. The dust, heavier today, had a darker gray color to it than before; it seemed denser, more mysterious.

Here and there, covered by many layers of dust, lay parcels dropped from past relief ships — dropped and left to deteriorate. Never to be claimed. And, Timothy saw, an additional new projectile which had arrived that morning.

Most of its cargo could be seen within; the grownups had not had any use for the majority of the contents, today.

“Look,” Fred said softly.

Two do-cats — mutant dogs or cats; no one knew for sure — could be seen, lightly sniffing at the projectile. Attracted by the unclaimed contents.

"We don't want them," Timothy said.

"That one's sure nice and fat," Fred said longingly. But it was Timothy that had the knife; all he himself had was a string with a metal bolt on the end, a bull-roarer that could kill a bird or a small animal at a distance — but useless against a do-cat, which generally weighed fifteen to twenty pounds and sometimes more.

High up in the sky a dot moved at immense speed, and Timothy knew that it was a care ship heading for another fluke-pit, bringing supplies to it. Sure are busy, he thought to himself. Those careboys always coming and going; they never stop, because if they did, the grownups would die. Wouldn't that be too bad? he thought ironically. Sure be sad.

Fred said, "Wave to it and maybe it'll drop something." He grinned at Timothy, and then they both broke out laughing.

"Sure," Timothy said. "Let's see; what do I want?" Again the two of them laughed at the idea of them wanting something. The two boys had the entire upstairs, as far as the eye could see… they had even more than the careboys had, and that was plenty, more than plenty.

"Do you think they know?" Fred said, "that our parents play Perky Pat with furniture made out of what they drop? I bet they don't know about Perky Pat; they never have seen a Perky Pat doll, and if they did they'd be really mad."

"You're right," Timothy said. "They'd be so sore they'd probably stop dropping stuff." He glanced at Fred, catching his eye.

"Aw no," Fred said. "We shouldn't tell them; your dad would beat you again if you did that, and probably me, too."

Even so, it was an interesting idea. He could imagine first the surprise and then the anger of the careboys; it would be fun to see that, see the reaction of the eight-legged Martian creatures who had so much charity inside their warty bodies, the cephalopodic univalve mollusk-like organisms who had voluntarily taken it upon themselves to supply succor to the waning remnants of the human race… this was how they got paid back for their charity, this utterly wasteful, stupid purpose to which their goods were being put. This stupid Perky Pat game that all the adults played.

And anyhow it would be very hard to tell them; there was almost no communication between humans and careboys. They were too different. Acts, deeds, could be done, conveying something… but not mere words, not mere *signs.* And anyhow —

A great brown rabbit bounded by to the right, past the half-completed house. Timothy whipped out his knife. “Oh boy!” he said aloud in excitement. “Let’s go!” He set off across the rubbly ground, Fred a little behind him. Gradually they gained on the rabbit; swift running came easy to the two boys: they had done much practicing.

“Throw the knife!” Fred panted, and Timothy, skidding to a halt, raised his right arm, paused to take aim, and then hurled the sharpened, weighted knife. His most valuable, self-made possession.

It cleaved the rabbit straight through its vitals. The rabbit tumbled, slid, raising a cloud of dust.

“I bet we can get a dollar for that!” Fred exclaimed, leaping up and down. “The hide alone — I bet we can get fifty cents just for the darn hide!”

Together, they hurried toward the dead rabbit, wanting to get there before a red-tailed hawk or a day-owl swooped on it from the gray sky above.

Bending, Norman Schein picked up his Perky Pat doll and said sullenly, “I’m quitting; I don’t want to play any more.”

Distressed, his wife protested, “But we’ve got Perky Pat all the way downtown in her new Ford hardtop convertible and parked and a dime in the meter and she’s shopped and now she’s in the analyst’s office reading *Fortune* — we’re way ahead of the Morrisons! Why do you want to quit, Norm?”

“We just don’t agree,” Norman grumbled. “You say analysts charged twenty dollars an hour and I distinctly remember them charging only ten; nobody could charge twenty. So you’re penalizing our side, and for what? The Morrisons agree it was only ten. Don’t you?” he said to Mr. and Mrs. Morrison, who squatted on the far side of the layout which combined both couples’ Perky Pat sets.

Helen Morrison said to her husband, “You went to the analyst more than I did; are you sure he charged only ten?”

“Well, I went mostly to group therapy,” Tod said. “At the Berkeley State Mental Hygiene Clinic, and they charged according to your ability to pay. And Perky Pat is at a *private* psychoanalyst.”

“We’ll have to ask someone else,” Helen said to Norman Schein. “I guess all we can do now this minute is suspend the game.” He found himself being glared at by her, too, now, because by his insistence on the one point he had put an end to their game for the whole afternoon.

“Shall we leave it all set up?” Fran Schein asked. “We might as well; maybe we can finish tonight after dinner.”

Norman Schein gazed down at their combined layout, the swanky shops, the well-lit streets with the parked new-model cars, all of them shiny, the split-level house itself, where Perky Pat lived and where she entertained Leonard, her boy friend. It was the *house* that he perpetually yearned for;

the house was the real focus of the layout — of all the Perky Pat layouts, however much they might otherwise differ.

Perky Pat's wardrobe, for instance, there in the closet of the house, the big bedroom closet. Her capri pants, her white cotton short-shorts, her two-piece polka dot swimsuit, her fuzzy sweaters… and there, in her bedroom, her hi-fi set, her collection of long playing records…

It had been this way, once, really been like this in the ol-days. Norm Schein could remember his own lp record collection, and he had once had clothes almost as swanky as Perky Pat's boy friend Leonard, cashmere jackets and tweed suits and Italian sportshirts and shoes made in England. He hadn't owned a Jaguar XKE sports car, like Leonard did, but he had owned a fine-looking old 1963 Mercedes-Benz, which he had used to drive to work.

We lived then, Norm Schein said to himself, *like Perky Pat and Leonard do now.* This is how it actually was.

To his wife he said, pointing to the clock radio which Perky Pat kept beside her bed, "Remember our G.E. clock radio? How it used to wake us up in the morning with classical music from that FM station, KSFR? The 'Wolf-gangers,' the program was called. From six A.M. to nine every morning."

"Yes," Fran said, nodding soberly. "And you used to get up before me; I knew I should have gotten up and fixed bacon and hot coffee for you, but it was so much fun just indulging myself, not stirring for half an hour longer, until the kids woke up."

"Woke up, hell; they were awake before we were," Norm said. "Don't you remember? They were in the back watching 'The Three Stooges' on TV until eight. Then I got up and fixed hot cereal for them, and then I went on to my job at Ampex down at Redwood City."

“Oh yes,” Fran said. “The TV.” Their Perky Pat did not have a TV set; they had lost it to the Regans in a game a week ago, and Norm had not yet been able to fashion another one realistic-looking enough to substitute. So, in a game, they pretended now that “the TV repairman had come for it.” That was how they explained their Perky Pat not having something she really would have had.

Norm thought, Playing this game… it’s like being back there, back in the world before the war. That’s why we play it, I suppose. He felt shame, but only fleetingly; the shame, almost at once, was replaced by the desire to play a little longer.

“Let’s not quit,” he said suddenly. “I’ll agree the psychoanalyst would have charged Perky Pat twenty dollars. Okay?”

“Okay,” both the Morrisons said together, and they settled back down once more to resume the game.

Tod Morrison had picked up their Perky Pat; he held it, stroking its blonde hair — theirs was blonde, whereas the Scheins’ was a brunette — and fiddling with the snaps of its skirt.

“Whatever are you doing?” his wife inquired.

“Nice skirt she has,” Tod said. “You did a good job sewing it.”

Norm said, “Ever know a girl, back in the ol-days, that looked like Perky Pat?”

“No,” Tod Morrison said somberly. “Wish I had, though. I *saw* girls like Perky Pat, especially when I was living in Los Angeles during the Korean War. But I just could never manage to know them personally. And of course there were really terrific girl singers, like Peggy Lee and Julie London… they looked a lot like Perky Pat.”

“Play,” Fran said vigorously. And Norm, whose turn it was, picked up the spinner and spun.

“Eleven,” he said. “That gets my Leonard out of the sports car repair garage and on his way to the race track.” He moved the Leonard doll ahead.

Thoughtfully, Tod Morrison said, “You know, I was out the other day hauling in perishables which the careboys had dropped… Bill Ferner was there, and he told me something interesting. He met a fluker from a fluke-pit down where Oakland used to be. And at that fluke-pit you know what they play? Not Perky Pat. They never have heard of Perky Pat.”

“Well, what do they play, then?” Helen asked.

“They have another doll entirely.” Frowning, Tod continued, “Bill says the Oakland fluker called it a Connie Companion doll. Ever hear of that?”

“A ‘Connie Companion’ doll,” Fran said thoughtfully. “How strange. I wonder what she’s like. Does she have a boy friend?”

“Oh sure,” Tod said. “His name is Paul. Connie and Paul. You know, we ought to hike down there to that Oakland Fluke-pit one of these days and see what Connie and Paul look like and how they live. Maybe we could learn a few things to add to our own layouts.”

Norm said, “Maybe we could play them.”

Puzzled, Fran said, “Could a Perky Pat play a Connie Companion? Is that possible? I wonder what would happen?”

There was no answer from any of the others. Because none of them knew.

As they skinned the rabbit, Fred said to Timothy, “Where did the name ‘fluker’ come from? It’s sure an ugly word; why do they use it?”

“A fluker is a person who lived through the hydrogen war,” Timothy explained. “You know, by a fluke. A fluke of fate? See? Because almost everyone was killed; there used to be thousands of people.”

“But what’s a ‘fluke,’ then? When you say a ‘fluke of fate’ —”

“A fluke is when fate has decided to spare you,” Timothy said, and that was all he had to say on the subject. That was all he knew.

Fred said thoughtfully, “But you and I, we’re not flukers because we weren’t alive when the war broke out. We were born after.”

“Right,” Timothy said.

“So anybody who calls me a fluker,” Fred said, “is going to get hit in the eye with my bull-roarer.”

“And ‘careboy,’ ” Timothy said, “that’s a made-up word, too. It’s from when stuff was dumped from jet planes and ships to people in a disaster area. They were called ‘care parcels’ because they came from people who cared.”

“I know that,” Fred said. “I didn’t ask that.”

“Well, I told you anyhow,” Timothy said.

The two boys continued skinning the rabbit.

Jean Regan said to her husband, “Have you heard about the Connie Companion doll?” She glanced down the long rough-board table to make sure none of the other families was listening. “Sam,” she said, “I heard it from Helen Morrison; she heard it from Tod and he heard it from Bill Ferner, I think. So it’s probably true.”

“What’s true?” Sam said.

“That in the Oakland Fluke-pit they don’t have Perky Pat; they have Connie Companion… and it occurred to me that maybe some of this — you know, this sort of emptiness, this boredom we feel now and then — maybe if we saw the Connie Companion doll and how she lives, maybe we could add enough to our own layout to —” She paused, reflecting. “To make it more complete.”

“I don’t care for the name,” Sam Regan said. “Connie Companion; it sounds cheap.” He spooned up some of the plain, utilitarian grain-mash which the careboys had been dropping, of late. And, as he ate a mouthful, he thought, I’ll bet Connie Companion doesn’t eat slop like this; I’ll bet she eats cheeseburgers with all the trimmings, at a high-type drive-in.

“Could we make a trek down there?” Jean asked.

“To Oakland Fluke-pit?” Sam stared at her. “*It’s fifteen miles,* all the way on the other side of the Berkeley Fluke-pit!”

“But this is important,” Jean said stubbornly. “And Bill says that a fluker from Oakland came all the way up here, in search of electronic parts or something… so if he can do it, we can. We’ve got the dust suits they dropped us. I know we could do it.”

Little Timothy Schein, sitting with his family, had overheard her; now he spoke up. “Mrs. Regan, Fred Chamberlain and I, we could trek down that far, if you pay us. What do you say?” He nudged Fred, who sat beside him. “Couldn’t we? For maybe five dollars.”

Fred, his face serious, turned to Mrs. Regan and said, “We could get you a Connie Companion doll. For five dollars for *each* of us.”

“Good grief,” Jean Regan said, outraged. And dropped the subject.

But later, after dinner, she brought it up again when she and Sam were alone in their quarters.

"Sam, I've got to see it," she burst out. Sam, in a galvanized tub, was taking his weekly bath, so he had to listen to her. "Now that we know it exists we have to play against someone in the Oakland Fluke-pit; at least we can do that. Can't we? Please." She paced back and forth in the small room, her hands clasped tensely. "Connie Companion may have a Standard Station and an airport terminal with jet landing strip and color TV and a French restaurant where they serve escargot, like the one you and I went to when we were first married… I just have to see her layout."

"I don't know," Sam said hesitantly. "There's something about Connie Companion doll that — makes me uneasy."

"What could it possibly be?"

"I don't know."

Jean said bitterly, "It's because you know her layout is so much better than ours and she's so much more than Perky Pat."

"Maybe that's it," Sam murmured.

"If you don't go, if you don't try to make contact with them down at the Oakland Fluke-pit, someone else will — someone with more ambition will get ahead of you. Like Norman Schein. He's not afraid the way you are."

Sam said nothing; he continued with his bath. But his hands shook.

A careboy had recently dropped complicated pieces of machinery which were, evidently, a form of mechanical computer. For several weeks the computers — if that was what they were — had sat about the pit in their cartons, unused, but now Norman Schein was finding something to do with

one. At the moment he was busy adapting some of its gears, the smallest ones, to form a garbage disposal unit for his Perky Pat's kitchen.

Using the tiny special tools — designed and built by inhabitants of the fluke-pit — which were necessary in fashioning environmental items for Perky Pat, he was busy at his hobby bench. Thoroughly engrossed in what he was doing, he all at once realized that Fran was standing directly behind him, watching.

"I get nervous when I'm watched," Norm said, holding a tiny gear with a pair of tweezers.

"Listen," Fran said, "I've thought of something. Does this suggest anything to you?" She placed before him one of the transistor radios which had been dropped the day before.

"It suggests that garage-door opener already thought of," Norm said irritably. He continued with his work, expertly fitting the miniature pieces together in the sink drain of Pat's kitchen; such delicate work demanded maximum concentration.

Fran said, "It suggests that there must be radio *transmitters* on Earth somewhere, or the careboys wouldn't have dropped these."

"So?" Norm said, uninterested.

"Maybe our Mayor has one," Fran said. "Maybe there's one right here in our own pit, and we could use it to call the Oakland Fluke-pit. Representatives from there could meet us halfway… say at the Berkeley Fluke-pit. And we could play there. So we wouldn't have that long fifteen mile trip."

Norman hesitated in his work; he set the tweezers down and said slowly, "I think possibly you're right." But if their Mayor Hooker Glebe had a radio transmitter, would he let them use it? And if he did —

"We can try," Fran urged. "It wouldn't hurt to try."

“Okay,” Norm said, rising from his hobby bench.

The short, sly-faced man in Army uniform, the Mayor of the Pinole Fluke-pit, listened in silence as Norm Schein spoke. Then he smiled a wise, cunning smile. “Sure, I have a radio transmitter. Had it all the time. Fifty watt output. But why would you want to get in touch with the Oakland Fluke-pit?”

Guardedly, Norm said, “That’s my business.”

Hooker Glebe said thoughtfully, “I’ll let you use it for fifteen dollars.”

It was a nasty shock, and Norm recoiled. Good Lord; all the money he and his wife had — they needed every bill of it for use in playing Perky Pat. Money was the tender in the game; there was no other criterion by which one could tell if he had won or lost. “That’s too much,” he said aloud.

“Well, say ten,” the Mayor said, shrugging.

In the end they settled for six dollars and a fifty cent piece.

“I’ll make the radio contact for you,” Hooker Glebe said. “Because you don’t know how. It will take time.” He began turning a crank at the side of the generator of the transmitter. “I’ll notify you when I’ve made contact with them. But give me the money now.” He held out his hand for it, and, with great reluctance, Norm paid him.

It was not until late that evening that Hooker managed to establish contact with Oakland. Pleased with himself, beaming in self-satisfaction, he appeared at the Scheins’ quarters, during their dinner hour. “All set,” he announced. “Say, you know there are actually *nine* fluke-pits in Oakland? I didn’t know that. Which you want? I’ve got one with the radio code of Red Vanilla.” He chuckled. “They’re tough and suspicious down there; it was hard to get any of them to answer.”

Leaving his evening meal, Norman hurried to the Mayor's quarters, Hooker puffing along after him.

The transmitter, sure enough, was on, and static wheezed from the speaker of its monitoring unit. Awkwardly, Norm seated himself at the microphone. "Do I just talk?" he asked Hooker Glebe.

"Just say, This is Pinole Fluke-pit calling. Repeat that a couple of times and then when they acknowledge, you say what you want to say." The Mayor fiddled with controls of the transmitter, fussing in an important fashion. "This is Pinole Fluke-pit," Norm said loudly into the microphone. Almost at once a clear voice from the monitor said, "This is Red Vanilla Three answering." The voice was cold and harsh; it struck him forcefully as distinctly alien. Hooker was right.

"Do you have Connie Companion down there where you are?"

"Yes we do," the Oakland fluker answered.

"Well, I challenge you," Norman said, feeling the veins in his throat pulse with the tension of what he was saying. "We're Perky Pat in this area; we'll play Perky Pat against your Connie Companion. Where can we meet?"

"Perky Pat," the Oakland fluker echoed. "Yeah, I know about her. What would the stakes be, in your mind?"

"Up here we play for paper money mostly," Norman said, feeling that his response was somehow lame.

"We've got lots of paper money," the Oakland fluker said cuttingly. "That wouldn't interest any of us. What else?"

“I don’t know.” He felt hampered, talking to someone he could not see; he was not used to that. People should, he thought, be face to face, then you can see the other person’s expression. This was not natural. “Let’s meet halfway,” he said, “and discuss it. Maybe we could meet at the Berkeley Fluke-pit; how about that?”

The Oakland fluker said, “That’s too far. You mean lug our Connie Companion layout all that way? It’s too heavy and something might happen to it.”

“No, just to discuss rules and stakes,” Norman said.

Dubiously, the Oakland fluker said, “Well, I guess we could do that. But you better understand — we take Connie Companion doll pretty damn seriously; you better be prepared to talk terms.”

“We will,” Norm assured him.

All this time Mayor Hooker Glebe had been cranking the handle of the generator; perspiring, his face bloated with exertion, he motioned angrily for Norm to conclude his palaver.

“At the Berkeley Fluke-pit,” Norm finished. “In three days. And send your best player, the one who has the biggest and most authentic layout. Our Perky Pat layouts are works of art, you understand.”

The Oakland fluker said, “We’ll believe that when we see them. After all, we’ve got carpenters and electricians and plasterers here, building our layouts; I’ll bet you’re all unskilled.”

“Not as much as you think,” Norm said hotly, and laid down the microphone. To Hooker Glebe — who had immediately stopped cranking — he said, “We’ll beat them. Wait’ll they see the garbage disposal unit I’m making for my Perky Pat; did you know there were people back in the ol-

days, I mean real alive human beings, who didn’t have garbage disposal units?”

“I remember,” Hooker said peevishly. “Say, you got a lot of cranking for your money; I think you gypped me, talking so long.” He eyed Norm with such hostility that Norm began to feel uneasy. After all, the Mayor of the pit had the authority to evict any fluker he wished; that was their law.

“I’ll give you the fire alarm box I just finished the other day,” Norm said. “In my layout it goes at the corner of the block where Perky Pat’s boy friend Leonard lives.”

“Good enough,” Hooker agreed, and his hostility faded. It was replaced, at once, by desire. “Let’s see it, Norm. I bet it’ll go good in my layout; a fire alarm box is just what I need to complete my first block where I have the mailbox. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome,” Norm sighed, philosophically.

When he returned from the two-day trek to the Berkeley Fluke-pit his face was so grim that his wife knew at once that the parley with the Oakland people had not gone well.

That morning a careboy had dropped cartons of a synthetic tea-like drink; she fixed a cup of it for Norman, waiting to hear what had taken place eight miles to the south.

“We haggled,” Norm said, seated wearily on the bed which he and his wife and child all shared. “They don’t want money; they don’t want goods — naturally not goods, because the darn careboys are dropping regularly down there, too.”

“What will they accept, then?”

Norm said, “Perky Pat herself.” He was silent, then.

“Oh good Lord,” she said, appalled.

“But if we win,” Norm pointed out, “we win Connie Companion.”

“And the layouts? What about them?”

“We keep our own. It’s just Perky Pat herself, not Leonard, not anything else.”

“But,” she protested, “what’ll we *do* if we lose Perky Pat?”

“I can make another one,” Norm said. “Given time. There’s still a big supply of thermoplastics and artificial hair, here in the pit. And I have plenty of different paints; it would take at least a month, but I could do it. I don’t look forward to the job, I admit. But —” His eyes glinted. “Don’t look on the dark side; *imagine what it would be like to win Connie Companion doll.* I think we may well win; their delegate seemed smart and, as Hooker said, tough… but the one I talked to didn’t strike me as being very flukey. You know, on good terms with luck.”

And, after all, the element of luck, of chance, entered into each stage of the game through the agency of the spinner.

“It seems wrong,” Fran said, “to put up Perky Pat herself. But if you say so —” She managed to smile a little. “I’ll go along with it. And if you won Connie Companion — who knows? You might be elected Mayor when Hooker dies. Imagine, to have won somebody else’s *doll* — not just the game, the money, but the *doll itself*

“I can win,” Norm said soberly. “Because I’m very flukey.” He could feel it in him, the same flukeyness that had got him through the hydrogen war alive, that had kept him alive ever since. You either have it or you don’t, he realized. And I do.

His wife said, “Shouldn’t we ask Hooker to call a meeting of everyone in the pit, and send the best player out of our entire group. So as to be the surest of winning.”

“Listen,” Norm Schein said emphatically. “I’m the best player. I’m going. And so are you; we make a good team, and we don’t want to break it up. Anyhow, we’ll need at least two people to carry Perky Pat’s layout.” All in all, he judged, their layout weighed sixty pounds.

His plan seemed to him to be satisfactory. But when he mentioned it to the others living in the Pinole Fluke-pit he found himself facing sharp disagreement. The whole next day was filled with argument.

“You can’t lug your layout all that way yourselves,” Sam Regan said. “Either take more people with you or carry your layout in a vehicle of some sort. Such as a cart.” He scowled at Norm.

“Where’d I get a cart?” Norm demanded.

“Maybe something could be adapted,” Sam said. “I’ll give you every bit of help I can. Personally, I’d go along but as I told my wife this whole idea worries me.” He thumped Norm on the back. “I admire your courage, you and Fran, setting off this way. I wish I had what it takes.” He looked unhappy.

In the end, Norm settled on a wheelbarrow. He and Fran would take turns pushing it. That way neither of them would have to carry any load above and beyond their food and water, and of course knives by which to protect them from the do-cats.

As they were carefully placing the elements of their layout in the wheelbarrow, Norm Schein’s boy Timothy came sidling up to them. “Take me along, Dad,” he pleaded. “For fifty cents I’ll go as guide and scout, and also I’ll help you catch food along the way.”

“We’ll manage fine,” Norm said. “You stay here in the fluke-pit; you’ll be safer here.” It annoyed him, the idea of his son tagging along on an important venture such as this. It was almost — sacreligious.

“Kiss us goodbye,” Fran said to Timothy, smiling at him briefly; then her attention returned to the layout within the wheelbarrow. “I hope it doesn’t tip over,” she said fearfully to Norm.

“Not a chance,” Norm said. “If we’re careful.” He felt confident.

A few moments later they began wheeling the wheelbarrow up the ramp to the lid at the top, to upstairs. Their journey to the Berkeley Fluke-pit had begun.

A mile outside the Berkeley Fluke-pit he and Fran began to stumble over empty drop-canisters and some only partly empty remains of past care parcels such as littered the surface near their own pit. Norm Schein breathed a sigh of relief; the journey had not been so bad after all, except that his hands had become blistered from gripping the metal handles of the wheelbarrow, and Fran had turned her ankle so that now she walked with a painful limp. But it had taken them less time than he had anticipated, and his mood was one of buoyancy.

Ahead, a figure appeared, crouching low in the ash. A boy. Norm waved at him and called, “Hey, sonny — we’re from the Pinole pit; we’re supposed to meet a party from Oakland here… do you remember me?”

The boy, without answering, turned and scampered off.

“Nothing to be afraid of,” Norm said to his wife. “He’s going to tell their Mayor. A nice old fellow named Ben Fennimore.”

Soon several adults appeared, approaching warily.

With relief, Norm set the legs of the wheelbarrow down into the ash, letting go and wiping his face with his handkerchief. “Has the Oakland team arrived yet?” he called.

“Not yet,” a tall, elderly man with a white armband and ornate cap answered. “It’s you Schein, isn’t it?” he said, peering. This was Ben Fennimore. “Back already with your layout.” Now the Berkeley flukers had begun crowding around the wheelbarrow, inspecting the Scheins’ layout. Their faces showed admiration.

“They have Perky Pat here,” Norm explained to his wife. “But —” He lowered his voice. “Their layouts are only basic. Just a house, wardrobe and car… they’ve built almost nothing. No imagination.”

One Berkeley fluker, a woman, said wonderingly to Fran, “And you made each of the pieces of furniture yourselves?” Marveling, she turned to the man beside her. “See what they’ve accomplished, Ed?”

“Yes,” the man answered, nodding. “Say,” he said to Fran and Norm, “can we see it all set up? You’re going to set it up in our pit, aren’t you?”

“We are indeed,” Norm said.

The Berkeley flukers helped push the wheelbarrow the last mile. And before long they were descending the ramp, to the pit below the surface.

“It’s a big pit,” Norm said knowingly to Fran. “Must be two thousand people here. This is where the University of California was.”

“I see,” Fran said, a little timid at entering a strange pit; it was the first time in years — since the war, in fact — that she had seen any strangers. And so many at once. It was almost too much for her; Norm felt her shrink back, pressing against him in fright.

When they had reached the first level and were starting to unload the wheelbarrow, Ben Fennimore came up to them and said softly, “I think the Oakland people have been spotted; we just got a report of activity upstairs. So be prepared.” He added, “We’re rooting for you, of course, because you’re Perky Pat, the same as us.”

“Have you ever seen Connie Companion doll?” Fran asked him.

“No ma’am,” Fennimore answered courteously. “But naturally we’ve heard about it, being neighbors to Oakland and all. I’ll tell you one thing… we hear that Connie Companion doll is a bit older than Perky Pat. You know — more, um, *matured.”* He explained, “I just wanted to prepare you.”

Norm and Fran glanced at each other. “Thanks,” Norm said slowly. “Yes, we should be as much prepared as possible. How about Paul?”

“Oh, he’s not much,” Fennimore said. “Connie runs things; I don’t even think Paul has a real apartment of his own. But you better wait until the Oakland flukers get here; I don’t want to mislead you — my knowledge is all hearsay, you understand.”

Another Berkeley fluker, standing nearby, spoke up. “I saw Connie once, and she’s much more grown up than Perky Pat.”

“How old do you figure Perky Pat is?” Norm asked him.

“Oh, I’d say seventeen or eighteen,” Norm was told.

“And Connie?” He waited tensely.

“Oh, she might be twenty-five, even.”

From the ramp behind them they heard noises. More Berkeley flukers appeared, and, after them, two men carrying between them a platform on

which, spread out, Norm saw a great, spectacular layout.

This was the Oakland team, and they weren't a couple, a man and wife; they were both men, and they were hard-faced with stern, remote eyes. They jerked their heads briefly at him and Fran, acknowledging their presence. And then, with enormous care, they set down the platform on which their layout rested.

Behind them came a third Oakland fluker carrying a metal box, much like a lunch pail. Norm, watching, knew instinctively that in the box lay Connie Companion doll. The Oakland fluker produced a key and began unlocking the box.

"We're ready to begin playing any time," the taller of the Oakland men said. "As we agreed in our discussion, we'll use a numbered spinner instead of dice. Less chance of cheating that way."

"Agreed," Norm said. Hesitantly he held out his hand. "I'm Norman Schein and this is my wife and play-partner Fran."

The Oakland man, evidently the leader, said, "I'm Walter R. Wynn. This is my partner here, Charley Dowd, and the man with the box, that's Peter Foster. He isn't going to play; he just guards our layout." Wynn glanced about, at the Berkeley flukers, as if saying, I know you're all partial to Perky Pat, in here. But we don't care; we're not scared.

Fran said, "We're ready to play, Mr. Wynn." Her voice was low but controlled.

"What about money?" Fennimore asked.

"I think both teams have plenty of money," Wynn said. He laid out several thousand dollars in greenbacks, and now Norm did the same. "The money of course is not a factor in this, except as a means of conducting the game."

Norm nodded; he understood perfectly. Only the dolls themselves mattered. And now, for the first time, he saw Connie Companion doll.

She was being placed in her bedroom by Mr. Foster who evidently was in charge of her. And the sight of her took his breath away. Yes, she was older. A grown woman, not a girl at all… the difference between her and Perky Pat was acute. And so life-like. Carved, not poured; she obviously had been whittled out of wood and then painted — she was not a thermoplastic. And her hair. It appeared to be genuine hair.

He was deeply impressed.

"What do you think of her?" Walter Wynn asked, with a faint grin.

"Very — impressive," Norm conceded.

Now the Oaklanders were studying Perky Pat. "Poured thermoplastic," one of them said. "Artificial hair. Nice clothes, though; all stitched by hand, you can see that. Interesting; what we heard was correct. Perky Pat isn't a grownup, she's just a teenager."

Now the male companion to Connie appeared; he was set down in the bedroom beside Connie.

"Wait a minute," Norm said. "You're putting Paul or whatever his name is, in her bedroom with her? Doesn't he have his own apartment?"

Wynn said, "They're married."

"Married!" Norman and Fran stared at him, dumbfounded.

"Why sure," Wynn said. "So naturally they live together. Your dolls, they're not, are they?"

“N-no,” Fran said. “Leonard is Perky Pat’s boy friend…” Her voice trailed off. “Norm,” she said, clutching his arm, “I don’t believe him; I think he’s just saying they’re married to get the advantage. Because if they both start out from the same room —”

Norm said aloud, “You fellows, look here. It’s not fair, calling them married.”

Wynn said, “We’re not ‘calling’ them married; they are married. Their names are Connie and Paul Lathrope, of 24 Arden Place, Piedmont. They’ve been married for a year, most players will tell you.” He sounded calm.

Maybe, Norm thought, it’s true. He was truly shaken.

“Look at them together,” Fran said, kneeling down to examine the Oaklanders’ layout. “In the same bedroom, in the same house. Why, Norm; do you see? There’s just the one bed. A big double bed.” Wild-eyed, she appealed to him. “How can Perky Pat and Leonard play against them?” Her voice shook. “It’s not morally *right.”*

“This is another type of layout entirely,” Norm said to Walter Wynn. “This, that you have. Utterly different from what we’re used to, as you can see.” He pointed to his own layout. “I insist that in this game Connie and Paul *not* live together and *not* be considered married.”

“But they are,” Foster spoke up. “It’s a fact. Look — their clothes are in the same closet.” He showed them the closet. “And in the same bureau drawers.” He showed them that, too. “And look in the bathroom. Two toothbrushes. His and hers, in the same rack. So you can see we’re not making it up.”

There was silence.

Then Fran said in a choked voice, “And if they’re married — you mean they’ve been — intimate?”

Wynn raised an eyebrow, then nodded. “Sure, since they’re married. Is there anything wrong with that?”

“Perky Pat and Leonard have never —” Fran began, and then ceased.

“Naturally not,” Wynn agreed. “Because they’re only going together. We understand that.”

Fran said, “We just can’t play. We can’t.” She caught hold of her husband’s arm. “Let’s go back to Pinole pit — please, Norman.”

“Wait,” Wynn said, at once. “If you don’t play, you’re conceding; you have to give up Perky Pat.”

The three Oaklanders all nodded. And, Norm saw, many of the Berkeley flukers were nodding, too, including Ben Fennimore.

“They’re right,” Norm said heavily to his wife. “We’d have to give her up. We better play, dear.”

“Yes,” Fran said, in a dead, flat voice. “We’ll play.” She bent down and listlessly spun the needle of the spinner. It stopped at six.

Smiling, Walter Wynn knelt down and spun. He obtained a four.

The game had begun.

Crouching behind the strewn, decayed contents of a care parcel that had been dropped long ago, Timothy Schein saw coming across the surface of ash his mother and father, pushing the wheelbarrow ahead of them. They looked tired and worn.

“Hi,” Timothy yelled, leaping out at them in joy at seeing them again; he had missed them very much.

“Hi, son,” his father murmured, nodding. He let go of the handles of the wheelbarrow, then halted and wiped his face with his handkerchief.

Now Fred Chamberlain raced up, panting. “Hi, Mr. Schein; hi, Mrs. Schein. Hey, did you win? Did you beat the Oakland flukers? I bet you did, didn’t you?” He looked from one of them to the other and then back.

In a low voice Fran said, “Yes, Freddy. We won.”

Norm said, “Look in the wheelbarrow.”

The two boys looked. And, there among Perky Pat’s furnishings, lay another doll. Larger, fuller-figured, much older than Pat… they stared at her and she stared up sightlessly at the gray sky overhead. So this is Connie Companion doll, Timothy said to himself. Gee.

“We were lucky,” Norm said. Now several people had emerged from the pit and were gathering around them, listening. Jean and Sam Regan, Tod Morrison and his wife Helen, and now their Mayor, Hooker Glebe himself, waddling up excited and nervous, his face flushed, gasping for breath from the labor — unusual for him — of ascending the ramp.

Fran said,“We got a cancellation of debts card, just when we were most behind. We owed fifty thousand, and it made us even with the Oakland flukers. And then, after that, we got an advance ten squares card, and that put us right on the jackpot square, at least in our layout. We had a very bitter squabble, because the Oaklanders showed us that on their layout it was a tax lien slapped on real estate holdings square, but we had spun an odd number so that put us back on our own board.” She sighed. “I’m glad to be back. It was hard, Hooker; it was a tough game.”

Hooker Glebe wheezed, “Let’s all get a look at the Connie Companion doll, folks.” To Fran and Norm he said, “Can I lift her up and show them?”

“Sure,” Norm said, nodding.

Hooker picked up Connie Companion doll. “She sure is realistic,” he said, scrutinizing her. “Clothes aren’t as nice as ours generally are; they look machine-made.”

“They are,” Norm agreed. “But she’s carved, not poured.”

“Yes, so I see.” Hooker turned the doll about, inspecting her from all angles. “A nice job. She’s — um, more filled-out than Perky Pat. What’s this outfit she has on? Tweed suit of some sort.”

“A business suit,” Fran said. “We won that with her; they had agreed on that in advance.”

“You see, she has a job,” Norm explained. “She’s a psychology consultant for a business firm doing marketing research. In consumer preferences. A high-paying position… she earns twenty thousand a year, I believe Wynn said.”

“Golly,” Hooker said. “And Pat’s just going to college; she’s still in school.” He looked troubled. “Well, I guess they were bound to be ahead of us in some ways. What matters is that you won.” His jovial smile returned. “Perky Pat came out ahead.” He held the Connie Companion doll up high, where everyone could see her. “Look what Norm and Fran came back with, folks!”

Norm said, “Be careful with her, Hooker.” His voice was firm.

“Eh?” Hooker said, pausing. “Why, Norm?”

“Because,” Norm said, “she’s going to have a baby.”

There was a sudden chill silence. The ash around them stirred faintly; that was the only sound.

“How do you know?” Hooker asked.

“They told us. The Oaklanders told us. And we won that, too — after a bitter argument that Fennimore had to settle.” Reaching into the wheelbarrow he brought out a little leather pouch, from it he carefully took a carved pink newborn baby. “We won this too because Fennimore agreed that from a technical standpoint it’s literally part of Connie Companion doll at this point.”

Hooker stared a long, long time.

“She’s married,” Fran explained. “To Paul. They’re not just going together. She’s three months pregnant, Mr. Wynn said. He didn’t tell us until after we won; he didn’t want to, then, but they felt they had to. I think they were right; it wouldn’t have done not to say.”

Norm said, “And in addition there’s actually an embryo outfit —”

“Yes,” Fran said. “You have to open Connie up, of course, to see —”

“No,” Jean Regan said. “Please, no.”

Hooker said, “No, Mrs. Schein, don’t.” He backed away.

Fran said, “It shocked us of course at first, but —”

“You see,” Norm put in, “it’s logical; you have to follow the logic. Why, eventually Perky Pat —”

“No,” Hooker said violently. He bent down, picked up a rock from the ash at his feet. “No,” he said, and raised his arm. “You stop, you two. Don’t

say any more."

Now the Regans, too, had picked up rocks. No one spoke. Fran said, at last, "Norm, we've got to get out of here."

"You're right," Tod Morrison told them. His wife nodded in grim agreement.

"You two go back down to Oakland," Hooker told Norman and Fran Schein. "You don't live here any more. You're different than you were. You — changed."

"Yes," Sam Regan said slowly, half to himself. "I was right; there was something to fear." To Norm Schein he said, "How difficult a trip is it to Oakland?"

"We just went to Berkeley," Norm said. "To the Berkeley Fluke-pit." He seemed baffled and stunned by what was happening. "My God," he said, "we can't turn around and push this wheelbarrow back all the way to Berkeley again — we're worn out, we need rest!"

Sam Regan said, "What if somebody else pushed?" He walked up to the Scheins, then, and stood with them. "I'll push the darn thing. You lead the way, Schein." He looked toward his own wife, but Jean did not stir. And she did not put down her handful of rocks.

Timothy Schein plucked at his father's arm. "Can I come this time, Dad? Please let me come."

"Okay," Norm said, half to himself. Now he drew himself together. "So we're not wanted here." He turned to Fran. "Let's go. Sam's going to push the wheelbarrow; I think we can make it back there before nightfall. If not, we can sleep out in the open; Timothy'll help protect us against the do-cats." Fran said, "I guess we have no choice." Her face was pale. "And take this," Hooker said. He held out the tiny carved baby. Fran Schein accepted

it and put it tenderly back in its leather pouch. Norm laid Connie Companion back down in the wheelbarrow, where she had been. They were ready to start back.

"It'll happen up here eventually," Norm said, to the group of people, to the Pinole flukers. "Oakland is just more advanced; that's all."

"Go on," Hooker Glebe said. "Get started."

Nodding, Norm started to pick up the handles of the wheelbarrow, but Sam Regan moved him aside and took them himself. "Let's go," he said.

The three adults, with Timothy Schein going ahead of them with his knife ready — in case a do-cat attacked — started into motion, in the direction of Oakland and the south. No one spoke. There was nothing to say.

"It's a shame this had to happen," Norm said at last, when they had gone almost a mile and there was no further sign of the Pinole flukers behind them.

"Maybe not," Sam Regan said. "Maybe it's for the good." He did not seem downcast. And after all, he had lost his wife; he had given up more than anyone else, and yet — he had survived.

"Glad you feel that way," Norm said somberly. They continued on, each with his own thoughts.

After a while, Timothy said to his father, "All these big fluke-pits to the south… there's lots more things to do there, isn't there? I mean, you don't just sit around playing that game." He certainly hoped not.

His father said, "That's true, I guess."

Overhead, a care ship whistled at great velocity and then was gone again almost at once; Timothy watched it go but he was not really interested in it, because there was so much more to look forward to, on the ground and below the ground, ahead of them to the south.

His father murmured, “Those Oaklanders; their game, their particular doll, it taught them something. Connie had to grow and it forced them all to grow along with her. Our flukers never learned about that, not from Perky Pat. I wonder if they ever will. She’d have to grow up the way Connie did. Connie must have been like Perky Pat, once. A long time ago.”

Not interested in what his father was saying — who really cared about dolls and games with dolls? — Timothy scampered ahead, peering to see what lay before them, the opportunities and possibilities, for him and for his mother and dad, for Mr. Regan also.

“I can’t wait,” he yelled back at his father, and Norm Schein managed a faint, fatigued smile in answer.

Standby

An hour before his morning program on channel six, ranking news clown Jim Briskin sat in his private office with his production staff, conferring on the report of an unknown possibly hostile flotilla detected at eight hundred astronomical units from the sun. It was big news, of course. But how should it be presented to his several-billion viewers scattered over three planets and seven moons?

Peggy Jones, his secretary, lit a cigarette and said, “Don’t alarm them, Jim-Jam. Do it folksy-style.” She leaned back, riffled the dispatches received by their commercial station from Unicephalon 40-D’s teletypers.

It had been the homeostatic problem-solving structure Unicephalon 40-D at the White House in Washington, D.C. which had detected this possible external enemy; in its capacity as President of the United States it had at once dispatched ships of the line to stand picket duty. The flotilla appeared to be entering from another solar system entirely, but that fact of course would have to be determined by the picket ships.

“Folksy-style,” Jim Briskin said glumly. “I grin and say, Hey look comrades — it’s happened at last, the thing we all feared, ha ha.” He eyed her. “That’ll get baskets full of laughs all over Earth and Mars but just possibly not on the far-out moons.” Because if there were some kind of attack it would be the farther colonists who would be hit first.

“No, they won’t be amused,” his continuity advisor Ed Fineberg agreed. He, too, looked worried; he had a family on Ganymede.

“Is there any lighter piece of news?” Peggy asked. “By which you could open your program? The sponsor would like that.” She passed the armload

of news dispatches to Briskin. “See what you can do. Mutant cow obtains voting franchise in court case in Alabama… you know.”

“I know,” Briskin agreed as he began to inspect the dispatches. One such as his quaint account — it had touched the hearts of millions — of the mutant blue jay which learned, by great trial and effort, to sew. It had sewn itself and its progeny a nest, one April morning, in Bismark, North Dakota, in front of the TV cameras of Briskin’s network.

One piece of news stood out; he knew intuitively, as soon as he saw it, that here he had what he wanted to lighten the dire tone of the day’s news. Seeing it, he relaxed. The worlds went on with business as usual, despite this great news-break from eight hundred AUs out.

“Look,” he said, grinning. “Old Gus Schatz is dead. Finally.”

“Who’s Gus Schatz?” Peggy asked, puzzled. “That name… it does sound familiar.”

“The union man,” Jim Briskin said. “You remember. The standby President, sent over to Washington by the union twenty-two years ago. He’s dead, and the union —” He tossed her the dispatch: it was lucid and brief. “Now it’s sending a new standby President over to take Schatz’s place. I think I’ll interview him. Assuming he can talk.”

“That’s right,” Peggy said. “I keep forgetting. There still is a human standby in case Unicephalon fails. Has it ever failed?”

“No.” Ed Fineberg said, “And it never will. So we have one more case of union featherbedding. The plague of our society.”

“But still,” Jim Briskin said, “people would be amused. The home life of the top standby in the country… why the union picked him, what his hobbies are. What this man, whoever he is, plans to do during his term to keep from going mad with boredom. Old Gus learned to bind books; he

collected rare old motor magazines and bound them in vellum with gold-stamped lettering."

Both Ed and Peggy nodded in agreement. "Do that," Peggy urged him. "You can make it interesting, Jim-Jam; you can make anything interesting. I'll place a call to the White House, or is the new man there yet?"

"Probably still at union headquarters in Chicago," Ed said. "Try a line there. Government Civil Servants' Union, East Division."

Picking up the phone, Peggy quickly dialed.

At seven o'clock in the morning Maximilian Fischer sleepily heard noises; he lifted his head from the pillow, heard the confusion growing in the kitchen, the landlady's shrill voice, then men's voices which were unfamiliar to him. Groggily, he managed to sit up, shifting his bulk with care. He did not hurry; the doc had said not to overexert, because of the strain on his already-enlarged heart. So he took his time dressing.

Must be after a contribution to one of the funds, Max said to himself. *It sounds like some of the fellas. Pretty early, though.* He did not feel alarmed. *I'm in good standing,* he thought firmly. *Nuthin' to fear.*

With care, he buttoned a fine pink and green-striped silk shirt, one of his favorites. *Gives me class,* he thought as with labored effort he managed to bend far enough over to slip on his authentic simulated deerskin pumps. *Be ready to meet them on an equality level,* he thought as he smoothed his thinning hair before the mirror. *If they shake me down too much I'll squawk directly to Pat Noble at the Noo York hiring hall; I mean, I don't have to stand for any stuff. I been in the union too long.*

From the other room a voice bawled, "Fischer — get your clothes on and come out. We got a job for you and it begins today."

A job, Max thought with mixed feelings; he did not know whether to be glad or sorry. For over a year now he had been drawing from the union fund, as were most of his friends. Well what do you know. *Gripes,* he thought; *suppose it's a hard job, like maybe I got to bend over all the time or move around.* He felt anger. *What a dirty deal. I mean, who do they think they are?* Opening the door, he faced them. "Listen," he began, but one of the union officials cut him off.

"Pack your things, Fischer. Gus Schatz kicked the bucket and you got to go down to Washington, D.C. and take over the number one standby; we want you there before they abolish the position or something and we have to go out on strike or go to court. Mainly, we want to get someone right in clean and easy with no trouble; you understand? Make the transition *so* smooth that no one hardly takes notice."

At once, Max said, "What's it pay?"

Witheringly, the union official said, "You got no decision to make in this; *you 're picked.* You want your freeloader fund-money cut off? You want to have to get out at your age and look for work?"

"Aw come on," Max protested. "I can pick up the phone and dial Pat Noble —"

The union officials were grabbing up objects here and there in the apartment. "We'll help you pack. Pat wants you in the White House by ten o'clock this morning."

"Pat!" Max echoed. He had been sold out.

The union officials, dragging suitcases from the closet, grinned.

Shortly, they were on their way across the flatlands of the Midwest by monorail. Moodily, Maximilian Fischer watched the countryside flash past; he said nothing to the officials flanking him, preferring to mull the matter

over and over in his mind. What could he recall about the number one standby job? It began at eight A.M. — he recalled reading that. And there always were a lot of tourists flocking through the White House to catch a glimpse of Unicephalon 40-D, especially the school kids… and he disliked kids because they always jeered at him due to his weight. Gripes, he'd have a million of them filing by, because he had to be on the premises. By law, he had to be within a hundred yards of Unicephalon 40-D at all times, day and night, or was it fifty yards? Anyhow it practically was right on top, so if the homeostatic problem-solving system failed — *Maybe I better bone up on this,* he decided. *Take a TV educational course on government administration, just in case.*

To the union official on his right, Max asked, "Listen, goodmember, do I have any powers in this job you guys got me? I mean, can I —"

"It's a union job like every other union job," the official answered wearily. "You sit. You stand by. Have you been out of work that long, you don't remember?" He laughed, nudging his companion. "Listen, Fischer here wants to know what authority the job entails." Now both men laughed. "I tell you what, Fischer," the official drawled. "When you're all set up there in the White House, when you got your chair and bed and made all your arrangements for meals and laundry and TV viewing time, why don't you amble over to Unicephalon 40-D and just sort of whine around there, you know, scratch and whine, until it notices you."

"Lay off," Max muttered.

"And then," the official continued, "you sort of say, Hey Unicephalon, listen. I'm your buddy. How about a little 'I scratch your back, you scratch mine.' You pass an ordinance for me —"

"But what can he do in exchange?" the other union official asked.

"Amuse it. He can tell it the story of his life, how he rose out of poverty and obscurity and educated himself by watching TV seven days a week

until finally, guess what, he rose all the way to the top; he got the job —" The official snickered. "Of standby President."

Maximilian, flushing, said nothing; he stared woodenly out of the monorail window.

When they reached Washington, D.C. and the White House, Maximilian Fischer was shown a little room. It had belonged to Gus, and although the faded old motor magazines had been cleared out, a few prints remained tacked on the walls: a 1963 Volvo S-122, a 1957 Peugeot 403 and other antique classics of a bygone age. And, on a bookcase, Max saw a hand-carved plastic model of a 1950 Studebaker Starlight coupe, with each detail perfect.

"He was making that when he croaked," one of the union officials said as he set down Max's suitcase. "He could tell you any fact there is about those old preturbine cars — any useless bit of car knowledge."

Max nodded.

"You got any idea what you're going to do?" the official asked him.

"Aw hell," Max said. "How could I decide so soon? Give me time." Moodily, he picked up the Studebaker Starlight coupe and examined its underside. The desire to smash the model car came to him; he put the car down, then, turning away.

"Make a rubber band ball," the official said.

"What?" Max said.

"The standby before Gus. Louis somebody-or-other… he collected rubber bands, made a huge ball, big as a house, by the time he died. I forget his name, but the rubber band ball is at the Smithsonian now."

There was a stir in the hallway. A White House receptionist, a middle-aged woman severely dressed, put her head in the room and said, “Mr. President, there’s a TV news clown here to interview you. Please try to finish with him as quickly as possible because we have quite a few tours passing through the building today and some may want to look at you.”

“Okay,” Max said. He turned to face the TV news clown. It was Jim-Jam Briskin, he saw, the ranking clown just now. “You want to see me?” he asked Briskin haltingly. “I mean, you’re sure it’s *me* you want to interview?” He could not imagine what Briskin could find of interest about him. Holding out his hand he added, “This is my room, but these model cars and pics aren’t mine; they were Gus’s. I can’t tell you nuthin’ about them.”

On Briskin’s head the familiar flaming-red clown wig glowed, giving him in real life the same bizarre cast that the TV cameras picked up so well. He was older, however, than the TV image indicated, but he had the friendly, natural smile that everyone looked for: it was his badge of informality, a really nice guy, even-tempered but with a caustic wit when occasion demanded. Briskin was the sort of man who… *well,* Max thought, *the sort of fella you’d like to see marry into your family.*

They shook hands. Briskin said, “You’re on camera, Mr. Max Fischer. Or rather, Mr. President, I should say. This is Jim-Jam talking. For our literally billions of viewers located in every niche and corner of this far-flung solar system of ours, let me ask you this. How does it feel, sir, to know that if Unicephalon 40-D should fail, even momentarily, you would be catapulted into the most important post that has ever fallen onto the shoulders of a human being, that of actual, not merely standby, President of the United States? Does it worry you at night?” He smiled. Behind him the camera technicians swung their mobile lenses back and forth; lights burned Max’s eyes and he felt the heat beginning to make him sweat under his arms and on his neck and upper lip. “What emotions grip you at this instant?” Briskin asked. “As you stand on the threshold of this new task for perhaps the balance of your life? What thoughts run through your mind, now that you’re actually here in the White House?”

After a pause, Max said, “It’s — a big responsibility.” And then he realized, he saw, that Briskin was laughing at him, laughing silently as he stood there. Because it was all a gag Briskin was pulling. Out in the planets and moons his audience knew it, too; they knew Jim-Jam’s humor.

“You’re a large man, Mr. Fischer,” Briskin said. “If I may say so, a stout man. Do you get much exercise? I ask this because with your new job you pretty well will be confined to this room, and I wondered what change in your life this would bring about.”

“Well,” Max said, “I feel of course that a Government employee should always be at his post. Yes, what you say is true; I have to be right here day and night, but that doesn’t bother me. I’m prepared for it.”

“Tell me,” Jim Briskin said, “do you —” And then he ceased. Turning to the video technicians behind him he said in an odd voice, “We’re off the air.”

A man wearing headphones squeezed forward past the cameras. “On the monitor, listen.” He hurriedly handed the headphones to Briskin. “We’ve been pre-empted by Unicephalon; it’s broadcasting a news bulletin.”

Briskin held the phones to his ear. His face writhed and he said, “Those ships at eight hundred AUs. They are hostile, it says.” He glanced up sharply at his technicians, the red clown’s wig sliding askew. “They’ve begun to attack.”

Within the following twenty-four hours the aliens had managed not only to penetrate the Sol System but also to knock out Unicephalon 40-D.

News of this reached Maximilian Fischer in an indirect manner as he sat in the White House cafeteria having his supper.

“Mr. Maximilian Fischer?”

“Yeah,” Max said, glancing up at the group of Secret Servicemen who had surrounded his table.

“You’re President of the United States.”

“Naw,” Max said. “I’m the standby President; that’s different.”

The Secret Serviceman said, “Unicephalon 40-D is out of commission for perhaps as long as a month. So according to the amended Constitution, you’re President and also Commander-in-Chief of the armed forces. We’re here to guard you.” The Secret Serviceman grinned ludicrously. Max grinned back. “Do you understand?” the Secret Serviceman asked. “I mean, does it penetrate?”

“Sure,” Max said. Now he understood the buzz of conversation he had overheard while waiting in the cafeteria line with his tray. It explained why White House personnel had looked at him strangely. He set down his coffee cup, wiped his mouth with his napkin, slowly and deliberately, pretended to be absorbed in solemn thought. But actually his mind was empty.

“We’ve been told,” the Secret Serviceman said, “that you’re needed at once at the National Security Council bunker. They want your participation in finalization of strategy deliberations.”

They walked from the cafeteria to the elevator.

“Strategy policy,” Max said, as they descended. “I got a few opinions about that. I guess it’s time to deal harshly with these alien ships, don’t you agree?”

The Secret Servicemen nodded.

“Yes, we got to show we’re not afraid,” Max said. “Sure, we’ll get finalization; we’ll blast the buggers.”

The Secret Servicemen laughed goodnaturedly.

Pleased, Max nudged the leader of the group. “I think we’re pretty goddam strong; I mean, the U.S.A. has got teeth.”

“You tell ‘em, Max,” one of the Secret Servicemen said, and they all laughed aloud. Max included.

As they stepped from the elevator they were stopped by a tall, well-dressed man who said urgently, “Mr. President, I’m Jonathan Kirk, White House press secretary; I think before you go in there to confer with the NSC people you should address the nation in this hour of gravest peril. The public wants to see what their new leader is like.” He held out a paper. “Here’s a statement drawn up by the Political Advisory Board; it codifies your —”

“Nuts,” Max said, handing it back without looking at it. “I’m the President, not you. Kirk? Burke? Shirk? Never heard of you. Show me the microphone and I’ll make my own speech. Or get me Pat Noble; maybe he’s got some ideas.” And then he remembered that Pat had sold him out in the first place; Pat had gotten him into this. “Not him either,” Max said. “Just give me the microphone.”

“This is a time of crisis,” Kirk grated.

“Sure,” Max said, “so leave me alone; you keep out of my way and I’ll keep out of yours. Ain’t that right?” He slapped Kirk goodnaturedly on the back. “And we’ll both be better off.”

A group of people with portable TV cameras and lighting appeared, and among them Max saw Jim-Jam Briskin, in the middle, with his staff.

“Hey, Jim-Jam,” he yelled. “Look, I’m President now!”

Stolidly, Jim Briskin came toward him.

“I’m not going to be winding no ball of string,” Max said. “Or making model boats, nuthin’ like that.” He shook hands warmly with Briskin. “I thank you,” Max said. “For your congratulations.”

“Congratulations,” Briskin said, then, in a low voice.

“Thanks,” Max said, squeezing the man’s hand until the knuckles creaked. “Of course, sooner or later they’ll get that noise-box patched up and I’ll just be standby again. But —” He grinned gleefully around at all of them; the corridor was full of people now, from TV to White House staff members to Army officers and Secret Servicemen.

Briskin said, “You have a big task, Mr. Fischer.”

“Yeah,” Max agreed.

Something in Briskin’s eyes said: *And I wonder if you can handle it. I wonder if you ‘re the man to hold such power.*

“Surely I can do it,” Max declared, into Briskin’s microphone, for all the vast audience to hear.

“Possibly you can,” Jim Briskin said, and on his face was dubiousness.

“Hey, you don’t like me any more,” Max said. “How come?”

Briskin said nothing, but his eyes flickered.

“Listen,” Max said, “I’m President now; I can close down your silly network - I can send FBI men in any time I want. For your information I’m firing the Attorney General right now, whatever his name is, and putting in a man I know, a man I can trust.”

Briskin said, “I see.” And now he looked less dubious; conviction, of a sort which Max could not fathom, began to appear instead. “Yes,” Jim Briskin said, “you have the authority to order that, don’t you? You’re really President…”

“Watch out,” Max said. “You’re nothing compared to me, Briskin, even if you do have that great big audience.” Then, turning his back on the cameras, he strode through the open door, into the NSC bunker.

Hours later, in the early morning, down in the National Security Council subsurface bunker, Maximilian Fischer listened sleepily to the TV set in the background as it yammered out the latest news. By now, intelligence sources had plotted the arrival of thirty more alien ships in the Sol System. It was believed that seventy in all had entered. Each was being continually tracked.

But that was not enough, Max knew. Sooner or later he would have to give the order to attack the alien ships. He hesitated. After all, who were they? Nobody at CIA knew. How strong were they? Not known either. And — would the attack be successful?

And then there were domestic problems. Unicephalon had continually tinkered with the economy, priming it when necessary, cutting taxes, lowering interest rates… that had ceased with the problem-solver’s destruction. *Jeez,* Max thought dismally. *What do I know about unemployment! I mean, how can I tell what factories to reopen and where?*

He turned to General Tompkins, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, who sat beside him examining a report on the scrambling of the tactical defensive ships protecting Earth. “They got all them ships distributed right?” he asked Tompkins.

“Yes, Mr. President,” General Tompkins answered.

Max winced. But the general did not seem to have spoken ironically; his tone had been respectful. “Okay,” Max murmured. “Glad to hear that. And

you got all that missile cloud up so there’re no leaks, like you let in that ship to blast Unicephalon. I don’t want that to happen again.”

“We’re under Defcon one,” General Tompkins said. “Full war footing, as of six o’clock, our time.”

“How about those strategic ships?” That, he had learned, was the euphemism for their offensive strike-force.

“We can mount an attack at any time,” General Tompkins said, glancing down at the long table to obtain the assenting nods of his co-workers. “We can take care of each of the seventy invaders now within our system.”

With a groan, Max said, “Anybody got any bicarb?” The whole business depressed him. *What a lot of work and sweat,* he thought. *All this goddam agitation — why don’t the buggers just leave our system ? I mean, do we* have *to get into a war? No telling what their home system will do in retaliation; you never can tell about unhuman life forms — they’re unreliable.*

“That’s what bothers me,” he said aloud. “Retaliation.” He sighed.

General Tompkins said, “Negotiation with them evidently is impossible.”

“Go ahead, then,” Max said. “Go give it to them.” He looked about for the bicarb.

“I think you’re making a wise choice,” General Tompkins said, and, across the table, the civilian advisors nodded in agreement.

“Here’s an odd piece of news,” one of the advisors said to Max. He held out a teletype dispatch. “James Briskin has just filed a writ of *mandamus*

against you in a Federal Court in California, claiming you're not legally President because you didn't run for office."

"You mean because I didn't get *voted* in?" Max said. "Just because of that?"

"Yes sir. Briskin is asking the Federal Courts to rule on this, and meanwhile he has announced his own candidacy."

"WHAT?"

"Briskin claims not only that you must run for office and be voted in, but you must run against him. And with his popularity he evidently feels —"

"Aw nuts," Max said in despair. "How do you like that."

No one answered.

"Well anyhow," Max said, "it's all decided; you military fellas go ahead and knock out those alien ships. And meanwhile —" He decided there and then. "We'll put economic pressure on Jim-Jam's sponsors, that Reinlander Beer and Calbest Electronics, to get him not to run."

The men at the long table nodded. Papers rattled as briefcases were put away; the meeting — temporarily — was at an end.

He's got an unfair advantage, Max said to himself. *How can I run when it's not equal, him a famous TV personality and me not? That's not right; I can't allow that.*

Jim-Jam can run, he decided, *but it won't do him any good.* He's not going to beat me because he's not going to be alive that long.

A week before the election, Telscan, the interplanetary public-opinion sampling agency, published its latest findings. Reading them, Maximilian Fischer felt more gloomy than ever.

"Look at this," he said to his cousin Leon Lait, the lawyer whom he had recently made Attorney General. He tossed the report to him.

His own showing of course was negligible. In the election, Briskin would easily, and most definitely, win.

"Why is that?" Lait asked. Like Max, he was a large, paunchy man who for years now had held a standby job; he was not used to physical activity of any sort and his new position was proving difficult for him. However, out of family loyalty to Max, he remained. "Is that because he's got all those TV stations?" he asked, sipping from his can of beer.

Max said cuttingly, "Naw, it's because his navel glows in the dark. Of course it's because of his TV stations, you jerk — he's got them pounding away night and day, creatin' an *image."* He paused, moodily. "He's a clown. It's that red wig; it's fine for a newscaster, but not for a President." Too morose to speak, he lapsed into silence.

And worse was to follow.

At nine P.M. that night, Jim-Jam Briskin began a seventy-two hour marathon TV program over all his stations, a great final drive to bring his popularity over the top and ensure his victory.

In his special bedroom at the White House, Max Fischer sat with a tray of food before him, in bed, gloomily facing the TV set.

That Briskin, he thought furiously for the millionth time. "Look," he said to his cousin; the Attorney General sat in the easy chair across from him. "There's the nerd now." He pointed to the TV screen.

Leon Lait, munching on his cheeseburger, said, “It’s abominable.”

“You know where he’s broadcasting from? Way out in deep space, out past Pluto. At their farthest-out transmitter, which your FBI guys will never in a million years manage to get to.”

“They will,” Leon assured him. “I told them they *have* to get him — the President, my cousin, personally says so.”

“But they won’t get him for a while,” Max said. “Leon, you’re just too damn slow. I’ll tell you something. I got a ship of the line out there, the *Dwight D. Eisenhower.* It’s all ready to lay an egg on them, you know, a big bang, just as soon as I pass on the word.”

“Right, Max.”

“And I hate to,” Max said.

The telecast had begun to pick up momentum already. Here came the Spotlights, and sauntering out onto the stage pretty Peggy Jones, wearing a glittery bare-shoulder gown, her hair radiant. *Now we get a top-flight striptease,* Max realized, *by a real fine-looking girl.* Even he sat up and took notice. Well, maybe not a true striptease, but certainly the opposition, Briskin and his staff, had sex working for them, here. Across the room his cousin the Attorney General had stopped munching his cheeseburger; the noise came to a halt, then picked up slowly once more.

On the screen, Peggy sang:

It’s Jim-Jam, for whom I am,

America’s best-loved guy.

It’s Jim-Jam, the best one that am,

The candidate for you and I.

“Oh God,” Max groaned. And yet, the way she delivered it, with every part of her slim, long body… it was okay. “I guess I got to inform the *Dwight D. Eisenhower* to go ahead,” he said, watching.

“If you say so, Max,” Leon said. “I assure you, I’ll rule that you acted legally; don’t worry none about that.”

“Gimme the red phone,” Max said. “That’s the armored connection that only the Commander-in-Chief uses for top-secret instructions. Not bad, huh?” He accepted the phone from the Attorney General. “I’m calling General Tompkins and he’ll relay the order to the ship. Too bad, Briskin,” he added, with one last look at the screen. “But it’s your own fault; you didn’t have to do what you did, opposing me and all.”

The girl in the silvery dress had gone, now, and Jim-Jam Briskin had appeared in her place. Momentarily, Max waited.

“Hi, beloved comrades,” Briskin said, raising his hands for silence; the canned applause — Max knew that no audience existed in that remote spot — lowered, then rose again. Briskin grinned amiably, waiting for it to die.

“It’s a fake,” Max grunted. “Fake audience. They’re smart, him and his staff. His rating’s already way up.”

“Right, Max,” the Attorney General agreed. “I noticed that.”

“Comrades,” Jim Briskin was saying soberly on the TV screen, “as you may know, originally President Maximilian Fischer and I got along very well.” His hand on the red phone, Max thought to himself that what Jim-Jam said was true.

“Where we broke,” Briskin continued, “was over the issue of force — of the use of naked, raw power. To Max Fischer, the office of President is merely a machine, an instrument, which he can use as an extension of his own desires, to fulfill his own needs. I honestly believe that in many

respects his aims are good; he is trying to carry out Unicephalon's fine policies. But as to the means. That's a different matter."

Max said, "Listen to him, Leon." And he thought, *No matter what he says I'm going to keep on; nobody is going to stand in my way, because it's my duty; it's the job of the office, and if you got to be President like I am you 'd do it, too.*

"Even the President," Briskin was saying, "must obey the law; he doesn't stand outside it, however powerful he is." He was silent for a moment and then he said slowly, "I know that at this moment the FBI, under direct orders from Max Fischer's appointee, Leon Lait, is attempting to close down these stations, to still my voice. Here again Max Fischer is making use of power, of the police agency, for his own ends, making it an extension —"

Max picked up the red phone. At once a voice said from it, "Yes, Mr. President. This is General Tompkins' C of C."

"What's that?" Max said.

"Chief of Communications, Army 600-1000, sir. Aboard the *Dwight D. Eisenhower,* accepting relay through the transmitter at the Pluto Station."

"Oh yeah," Max said, nodding. "Listen, you fellas stand by, you understand? Be ready to receive instructions." He put his hand over the mouthpiece of the phone. "Leon," he said to his cousin, who had now finished his cheeseburger and was starting on a strawberry shake. "How can I do it? I mean, Briskin is telling the truth."

Leon said, "Give Tompkins the word." He belched, then tapped himself on the chest with the side of his fist. "Pardon me."

On the screen Jim Briskin said, "I think very possibly I'm risking my life to speak to you, because this we must face: we have a President who

would not mind employing murder to obtain his objectives. This is the political tactic of a tyranny, and that's what we're seeing, a tyranny coming into existence in our society, replacing the rational, disinterested rule of the homeostatic problem-solving Unicephalon 40-D which was designed, built and put into operation by some of the finest minds we have ever seen, minds dedicated to the preservation of all that's worthy in our tradition. And the transformation from this to a one-man tyranny is melancholy, to say the least."

Quietly, Max said, "Now I can't go ahead."

"Why not?" Leon said.

"Didn't you hear him? He's talking about *me.* I'm the tyrant he has reference to. Keerist." Max hung up the red phone. "I waited too long."

"It's hard for me to say it," Max said, "but — well, hell, it would prove he's right." *I know he's right anyhow,* Max thought. *But do* they *know it? Does the public know it? I can't let them find out about me,* he realized. *They should look up to their President, respect him. Honor him. No wonder I show up so bad in the Telscan poll. No wonder Jim Briskin decided to run against me the moment he heard I was in office. They really do know about me; they sense it, sense that Jim-Jam is speaking the truth. I'm just not Presidential caliber.*

I'm not fit, he thought, *to hold this office.*

"Listen, Leon," he said, "I'm going to give it to that Briskin anyhow and then step down. It'll be my last official act." Once more he picked up the red phone. "I'm going to order them to wipe out Briskin and then someone else can be President. Anyone the people want. Even Pat Noble or you; I don't care." He jiggled the phone. "Hey, C. of C.," he said loudly. "Come on, answer." To his cousin he said, "Leave me some of that shake; it's actually half mine."

"Sure, Max," Leon said loyally.

“Isn’t no one there?” Max said into the phone. He waited. The phone remained dead. “Something’s gone wrong,” he said to Leon. “Communications have busted down. It must be those aliens again.”

And then he saw the TV screen. It was blank.

“What’s happening?” Max said. “What are they doing to me? *Who’s* doing it?” He looked around, frightened. “I don’t get it.”

Leon stoically drank the milkshake, shrugging to show that he had no answer. But his beefy face had paled.

“It’s too late,” Max said. “For some reason it’s just too late.” Slowly, he hung up the phone. “I’ve got enemies, Leon, more powerful than you or me. And I don’t even know who they are.” He sat in silence, before the dark, soundless TV screen. Waiting.

The speaker of the TV set said abruptly, “Psuedo-autonomic news bulletin. Stand by, please.” Then again there was silence.

Jim Briskin, glancing at Ed Fineberg and Peggy, waited.

“Comrade citizens of the United States,” the flat, unmodulated voice from the TV speaker said, all at once. “The interregnum is over, the situation has returned to normal.” As it spoke, words appeared on the monitor screen, a ribbon of printed tape passing slowly across, before the TV cameras in Washington, D.C. Unicephalon 40-D had spliced itself into the co-ax in its usual fashion; it had pre-empted the program in progress: that was its traditional right.

The voice was the synthetic verbalizing-organ of the homeostatic structure itself.

“The election campaign is nullified,” Unicephalon 40-D said. “That is item one. The standby President Maximilian Fischer is cancelled out; that is

item two. Item three: we are at war with the aliens who have invaded our system. Item four. James Briskin, who has been speaking to you —”

This is it, Jim Briskin realized.

In his earphones the impersonal, plateau-like voice continued, “Item four. James Briskin, who has been speaking to you on these facilities, is hereby ordered to cease and desist, and a writ *of mandamus* is issued forthwith requiring him to show just cause why he should be free to pursue any further political activity. In the public interest we instruct him to become politically silent.”

Grinning starkly at Peggy and Ed Fineberg, Briskin said, “That’s it. It’s over. I’m to politically shut up.”

“You can fight it in the courts,” Peggy said at once. “You can take it all the way up to the Supreme Court; they’ve set aside decisions of Unicephalon in the past.” She put her hand on his shoulder, but he moved away. “Or do you want to fight it?”

“At least I’m not cancelled out,” Briskin said. He felt tired. “I’m glad to see that machine back in operation,” he said, to reassure Peggy. “It means a return to stability. *That* we can use.”

“What’ll you do, Jim-Jam?” Ed asked. “Go back to Reinlander Beer and Calbest Electronics and try to get your old job back?”

“No,” Briskin murmured. Certainly not that. But — he could not really become politically silent; he could not do what the problem-solver said. It simply was not biologically possible for him; sooner or later he would begin to talk again, for better or worse. *And*, he thought, *I’ll bet Max can’t do what it says either… neither of us can.*

Maybe, he thought, *I’ll answer the writ of* mandamus; *maybe I’ll contest it. A counter suit… I’ll sue Unicephalon 40-D in a court of law. Jim-Jam*

Briskin the plaintiff, Unicephalon 40-D the defendant. He smiled. *I'll need a good lawyer for that. Someone quite a bit better than Max Fischer's top legal mind, cousin Leon Lait.*

Going to the closet of the small studio in which they had been broadcasting, he got his coat and began to put it on. A long trip lay ahead of them back to Earth from this remote spot, and he wanted to get started.

Peggy, following after him, said, "You're not going back on the air *at all?* Not even to finish the program?"

"No," he said.

"But Unicephalon will be cutting back out again, and what'll that leave? Just dead air. That's not right, is it, Jim? Just to walk out like this… I can't believe you'd do it, it's not like you."

He halted at the door of the studio. "You heard what it said. The instructions it handed out to me."

"Nobody leaves dead air going," Peggy said. "It's a vacuum, Jim, the thing nature abhors. *And if you don't fill it, someone else will.* Look, Unicephalon is going back off right now." She pointed at the TV monitor. The ribbon of words had ceased; once more the screen was dark, empty of motion and light. "It's your responsibility," Peggy said, "and you know it."

"Are we back on the air?" he asked Ed.

"Yes. It's definitely out of the circuit, at least for a while." Ed gestured toward the vacant stage on which the TV cameras and lights focussed. He said nothing more; he did not have to.

With his coat still on, Jim Briskin walked that way. Hands in his pockets he stepped back into the range of the cameras, smiled and said, "I think,

beloved comrades, the interruption is over. For the time being, anyhow. So… let's continue."

The noise of canned applause — manipulated by Ed Fineberg — swelled up, and Jim Briskin raised his hands and signalled the nonexistent studio audience for silence.

"Does any of you know a good lawyer?" Jim-Jam asked caustically. "And if you do, phone us and tell us right away — before the FBI finally manages to reach us out here."

In his bedroom at the White House, as Unicephalon's message ended, Maximilian Fischer turned to his cousin Leon and said, "Well, I'm out of office."

"Yeah, Max," Leon said heavily. "I guess you are."

"And you, too," Max pointed out. "It's going to be a clean sweep; you can count on that. Cancelled." He gritted his teeth. "That's sort of insulting. It could have said *retired."*

"I guess that's just its way of expressing itself," Leon said. "Don't get upset, Max; remember your heart trouble. You still got the job of standby, and that's the top standby position there is, Standby President of the United States, I want to remind you. And now you've got all this worry and effort off your back; you're lucky."

"I wonder if I'm allowed to finish this meal," Max said, picking at the food in the tray before him. His appetite, now that he was retired, began almost at once to improve; he selected a chicken salad sandwich and took a big bite from it. "It's still mine," he decided, his mouth full. "I still get to live here and eat regularly — right?"

"Right," Leon agreed, his legal mind active. "That's in the contract the union signed with Congress; remember back to that? We didn't go out on

strike for nothing."

"Those were the days," Max said. He finished the chicken salad sandwich and returned to the eggnog. It felt good not to have to make big decisions; he let out a long, heartfelt sigh and settled back into the pile of pillows propping him up.

But then he thought, *In some respects I sort of enjoyed making decisions. I mean, it was* — He searched for the thought. *It was different from being a standby or drawing unemployment. It had —*

Satisfaction, he thought. *That's what it gave me. Like I was accomplishing something.* He missed that already; he felt suddenly hollow, as if things had all at once become purposeless.

"Leon," he said, "I could have gone on as President another whole month. And enjoyed the job. You know what I mean?"

"Yeah, I guess I get your meaning," Leon mumbled.

"No you don't," Max said.

"I'm trying, Max," his cousin said. "Honest."

With bitterness, Max said, "I shouldn't have had them go ahead and let those engineer-fellas patch up that Unicephalon; I should have buried the project, at least for six months."

"Too late to think about that now," Leon said.

Is it? Max asked himself. *You know, something could* happen *to Unicephalon 40-D. An accident.*

He pondered that as he ate a piece of green-apple pie with a wide slice of longhorn cheese. A number of persons whom he knew could pull off such tasks … and did so, now and then.

A big, nearly-fatal accident, he thought. *Late some night, when everyone's asleep and it's just me and it awake here in the White House. I mean, let's face it; the aliens showed us how.*

"Look, Jim-Jam Briskin's back on the air," Leon said, gesturing at the TV set. Sure enough, there was the famous, familiar red wig, and Briskin was saying something witty and yet profound, something that made one stop to ponder. "Hey listen," Leon said. "He's poking fun at the FBI; can you imagine him doing that *now?* He's not scared of anything."

"Don't bother me," Max said. "I'm thinking." He reached over and carefully turned the sound of the TV set off.

For thoughts such as he was having he wanted no distractions.

What’ll We Do with Ragland Park?

In his demesne near the logging town of John Day, Oregon, Sebastian Hada thoughtfully ate a grape as he watched the TV screen. The grapes, flown to Oregon by illegal jet transport, came from one of his farms in the Sonoma Valley of California. He spat the seeds into the fireplace across from him, half-listening to his CULTURE announcer delivering a lecture on the portrait busts of twentieth-century sculptors.

If only I could get Jim Briskin on my network, Hada thought gloomily. The ranking TV news clown, so popular, with his flaming scarlet wig and genial, informal patter… CULTURE needs that, Hada realized. But —

But their society, at the moment, was being run by the idiotic — but peculiarly able — President Maximilian Fischer, who had locked horns with Jim-Jam Briskin; who had, in fact, clapped the famous news clown in jail. So, as a result, Jim-Jam was available neither for the commercial network which linked the three habitable planets nor for CULTURE. And meanwhile, Max Fischer ruled on.

If I could get Jim-Jam out of prison, Hada thought, perhaps due to gratitude he’d move over to my network, leave his sponsors Reinlander Beer and Calbest Electronics; after all, they have not been able to free him despite their intricate court maneuvers. They don’t have the power or the know-how… *and I have.*

One of Hada’s wives, Thelma, had entered the living room of the demesne and now stood watching the TV screen from behind him. “Don’t place yourself there, please,” Hada said. “It gives me a panic reaction; I like to see people’s faces.” He twisted around in his deep chair.

“The fox is back,” Thelma said. “I saw him; he glared at me.” She laughed with delight. “He looked so feral and independent — a bit like you,

Seb. I wish I could have gotten a film clip of him."

"I must spring Jim-Jam Briskin," Hada said aloud; he had decided.

Picking up the phone, he dialed culture's production chief, Nat Kaminsky, at the transmitting Earth satellite Culone.

"In exactly one hour," Hada told his employee, "I want all our outlets to begin crying for Jim-Jam Briskin's release from jail. He's not a traitor, as President Fischer declares. In fact, his political rights, his freedom of speech, have been taken away from him — illegally. Got it? Show clips of Briskin, build him up… you understand." Hada hung up then, and dialed his attorney, Art Heaviside.

Thelma said, "I'm going back outdoors and feed the animals."

"Do that," Hada said, lighting an Abdulla, a British-made Turkish cigarette which he was most fond of. "Art?" he said into the phone. "Get started on Jim-Jam Briskin's case; find a way to free him."

His lawyer's voice came protestingly, "But, Seb, if we mix into that, we'll have President Fischer after us with the FBI; it's too risky."

Hada said, "I need Briskin. CULTURE has become pompous — look at the screen right this minute. Education and art — we need a *personality,* a good news clown; we need Jim-Jam." Telscan's surveys, of late, had shown an ominous dropping-off of viewers, but he did not tell Art Heaviside that; it was confidential.

Sighing, the attorney said, "Will do, Seb. But the charge against Briskin is sedition in time of war."

"Time of war? With whom?"

“Those alien ships — you know. That entered the Sol System last February. Darn it, Seb; you know we’re at war — you can’t be so lofty as to deny that; it’s a legal fact.”

“In my opinion,” Hada said, “the aliens are not hostile.” He put the receiver down, feeling angry. It’s Max Fischer’s way of holding onto supreme power, he said to himself. Thumping the war-scare drum. I ask you, What *actual* damage have the aliens done lately? After all, we don’t own the Sol System. We just like to think we do.

In any case, CULTURE — educational TV itself — was withering, and as the owner of the network, Sebastian Hada had to act. Am I personally declining in vigor? he asked himself.

Once more picking up the phone, he dialed his analyst, Dr. Ito Yasumi, at his demesne outside of Tokyo. I need help, he said to himself. CULTURE’s creator and financial backer needs help. And Dr. Yasumi can give it to me.

Facing him from across his desk, Dr. Yasumi said, “Hada, maybe problem stems from you having eight wives. That’s about five too many.” He waved Hada back to the couch. “Be calm, Hada. Pretty sad that big-time operator like Mr. S. Hada falling apart under stress. You afraid President Fischer’s FBI get you like they got Jim Briskin?” He smiled.

“No,” Hada said. “I’m fearless.” He lay semisupine, arms behind his head, gazing at a Paul Klee print on the wall… or perhaps it was an original; good analysts did make a god-awful amount of money: Yasumi’s charge to him was one thousand dollars a half hour.

Yasumi said contemplatively, “Maybe you should seize power, Hada, in bold coup against Max Fischer. Make successful power play of your own; become President and then release Mr. Jim-Jam — no problem then.”

“Fischer has the Armed Forces behind him,” Hada said gloomily. “As Commander-in-Chief. Because of General Tompkins, who likes Fischer,

they’re absolutely loyal.” He had already thought of this. “Maybe I ought to flee to my demesne on Callisto,” he murmured. It was a superb one, and Fischer, after all, had no authority there; it was not U.S. but Dutch territory. “Anyhow, I don’t want to fight; I’m not a fighter, a street brawler; I’m a cultured man.”

“You are biophysical organism with built-in responses; you are alive. All that lives strives to survive. You will fight if necessary, Hada.”

Looking at his watch, Hada said, “I have to go, Ito. At three I’ve an appointment in Havana to interview a new folksinger, a ballad-and-banjo man who’s sweeping Latin America. Ragland Park is his name; he can bring life back into CULTURE.”

“I know of him,” Ito Yasumi said. “Saw him on commercial TV; very good performer. Part Southern U.S., part Dane, very young, with huge black mustache and blue eyes. Magnetic, this Rags, as is called.”

“But is folksinging cultural?” Hada murmured.

“I tell you something,” Dr. Yasumi said. “There strangeness about Rags Park; I noted even over TV. Not like other people.”

“That’s why he’s such a sensation.”

“More than that. I diagnose.” Yasumi reflected. “You know, mental illness and psionic powers closely related, as in poltergeist effect. Many schizophrenics of paranoid variety are telepaths, picking up hate thoughts in subconscious of persons around them.”

“I know,” Hada sighed, thinking that this was costing him hundreds of dollars, this spouting of psychiatric theory.

“Go careful with Rags Park,” Dr. Yasumi cautioned. “You volatile type, Hada; jump too quick. First, idea of springing Jim-Jam Briskin — risking FBI wrath — and now this Rags Park. You like hat designer or human flea. Best bet, as I say, is to openly face President Fischer, not deviousness as I foresee you doing.”

“Devious?” Hada murmured. “I’m not devious.”

“You most devious patient I got,” Dr. Yasumi told him bluntly. “You got nothing but tricky bones in your body, Hada. Watch out or you scheme yourself out of existence.” He nodded with great soberness.

“I’ll go carefully,” Hada said, his mind on Rags Park; he barely heard what Dr. Yasumi was telling him.

“A favor,” Dr. Yasumi said. “When you can arrange, let me examine Mr. Park; I would enjoy, okay? For your good, Hada, as well as professional interest. Psi talent may be of new kind; one never knows.”

“Okay,” Hada agreed. “I’ll give you a call.” But, he thought, I’m not going to pay for it; your examination of Rags Park will be on your own time.

There was an opportunity before his appointment with the ballad singer Rags Park to drop by the federal prison in New York at which Jim-Jam Briskin was being held on the sedition in time of war charge.

Hada had never met the news clown face-to-face, and he was surprised to discover how much older the man looked than on the TV. But perhaps Briskin’s arrest, his troubles with President Fischer, had temporarily overwhelmed him. It would be enough to overwhelm anyone, Hada reflected as the deputy unlocked the cell and admitted him.

“How did you happen to tangle with President Fischer?” Hada asked.

The news clown shrugged and said, “You lived through that period in history as much as I did.” He lit a cigarette and stared woodenly past Hada.

He was referring, Hada realized, to the demise of the great problem-solving computer at Washington, D.C., Unicephalon 40-D; it had ruled as President of the United States and Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces until a missile, delivered by the alien ships, had put it out of action. During that period, the standby President, Max Fischer, had taken power, a clod appointed by the union, a primitive man with an unnatural bucolic cunning. When at last Unicephalon 40-D had been repaired and had resumed functioning, it had ordered Fischer to depart his office and Jim Briskin to cease political activity. Neither man had complied. Briskin had gone on campaigning against Max Fischer, and Fischer had managed, by some method still unknown, to disable the computer, thereby again becoming President of the United States.

And his initial act had been to clap Jim-Jam in jail.

“Has Art Heaviside, my attorney, seen you?” Hada asked.

“No,” Briskin said shortly.

“Listen, my friend,” Hada said, “without my help you’ll be in prison forever, or at least until Max Fischer dies. This time he isn’t making the mistake of allowing Unicephalon 40-D to be repaired; it’s out of action for good.”

Briskin said, “And you want me on your network in exchange for getting me out of here.” He smoked rapidly at his cigarette.

“I need you, Jim-Jam,” Hada said. “It took courage for you to expose President Fischer for the power-hungry buffoon he is; we’ve got a terrible menace hanging over us in Max Fischer, and if we don’t join together and work fast it’ll be too late; we’ll both be dead. You know — in fact you said

it on TV — that Fischer would gladly stoop to assassination to get what he wants."

Briskin said, "Can I say what I want over your facilities?"

"I give you absolute freedom. Attack anyone you want, including me."

After a pause, Briskin said, "I'd take your offer, Hada… but I doubt if even Art Heaviside can get me out of here. Leon Lait, Fischer's Attorney General, is conducting the prosecution against me personally."

"Don't resign yourself," Hada said. "Billions of your viewers are waiting to see you emerge from this cell. At this moment all my outlets are clamoring for your release. Public pressure is building up. Even Max will have to listen to that."

"What I'm afraid of is that an 'accident' will happen to me," Briskin said. "Just like the 'accident' that befell Unicephalon 40-D a week after it resumed functioning. If it couldn't save itself, how can —"

"*You* afraid?" Hada inquired, incredulous. "Jim-Jam Briskin, the ranking news clown — I don't believe it."

There was silence.

Briskin said, "The reason my sponsors, Reinlander Beer and Calbest Electronics, haven't been able to get me out is" — he paused — "pressure put on them by President Fischer. Their attorneys as much as admitted that to me. When Fischer learns you're trying to help me, he'll bring all the pressure he has to bear directly on you." He glanced up acutely at Hada. "Do you have the stamina to endure it? I wonder."

"Certainly I have," Hada said. "As I told Dr. Yasumi —"

"And he'll put pressure on your wives," Jim-Jam Briskin said.

“I’ll divorce all eight of them,” Hada said hotly.

Briskin held out his hand and they shook. “It’s a deal then,” Jim-Jam said. “I’ll go to work for CULTURE as soon as I’m out of here.” He smiled in a weary but hopeful way.

Elated, Hada said, “Have you ever heard of Rags Park, the folk and ballad singer? At three today I’m signing him, too.”

“There’s a TV set here and now and then I catch one of Park’s numbers,” Briskin said. “He sounds good. But do you want that on CULTURE? It’s hardly educational.”

“CULTURE is changing. We’re going to sugarcoat our didacticisms from now on. We’ve been losing our audience. I don’t intend to see CULTURE wither away. The very concept of it —”

The word “culture” stood for Committee Utilizing Learning Techniques for Urban Renewal Efforts. A major part of Hada’s real estate holdings consisted of the city of Portland, Oregon, which he had acquired — intact — ten years ago. It was not worth much; typical of the semiabandoned slum constellations which had become not only repellent but obsolete, Portland had a certain sentimental value to him because he had been born there.

However, one notion lingered in his mind. If for any reason the colonies on the other planets and moons had to be abandoned, if the settlers came streaming back to Earth, the cities would be repopulated once more. And with the alien ships flitting about the farther planets, this was not as implausible as it sounded. In fact, a few families had emigrated back to Earth already…

So, underneath, CULTURE was not quite the disinterested public service nonprofit agency that it appeared. Mixed in with the education, Hada’s outlets drummed away at the seductive idea of *the city*, how much it

could offer, how little there was to be had in the colonies. Give up the difficult, crude life of the frontier, CULTURE declared night and day. Return to your own planet; repair the decaying cities. They're your real home.

Did Briskin know this? Hada wondered. Did the news clown understand the actual purpose of his organization?

Hada would find that out — if and when he managed to get Briskin out of jail and before a CULTURE microphone.

At three o'clock Sebastian Hada met the folksinger Ragland Park at the Havana office of CULTURE.

"I'm glad to make your acquaintance," Rags Park said shyly. Tall, skinny, with his huge black mustache hiding most of his mouth, he shuffled about self-consciously, his blue eyes gentle with authentic friendliness. He had an unusual sweetness about him, Hada noted. Almost a saintly quality. Hada found himself impressed.

"And you play both the guitar and five-string banjo?" Hada said. "Not at once, of course."

Rags Park mumbled, "No, sir. I alternate. Want me to play something right now for you?"

"Where were you born?" Nat Kaminsky asked. Hada had brought his production chief along; in matters such as this, Kaminsky's opinion was valuable.

"In Arkansas," Rags answered. "My family raises hogs." He had his banjo with him and now, nervously, he twanged a few notes. "I know a real sad song that'll break your heart. It's called 'Poor Old Hoss.' Want me to sing it for you?"

“We’ve heard you,” Hada said. “We know you’re good.” He tried to imagine this awkward young man twanging away over CULTURE in between lectures on twentieth-century portrait sculptors. Hard to imagine…

Rags said, “I bet there’s one thing you don’t know about me, Mr. Hada. I make up a lot of my own ballads.”

“Creative,” Kaminsky said to Hada straight-faced. “That’s good.”

“For instance,” Rags continued, “I once made up a ballad about a man named Tom McPhail who ran ten miles with a bucket of water to put out the fire in his little daughter’s crib.”

“Did he make it?” Hada asked.

“Sure did. Just in time. Tom McPhail ran faster and faster with that bucket of water.” Chanting, Rags twanged in accompaniment.

“Here comes Tom McPhail

Holdin’ on tight to that great little pail.

Holdin’ on tight, boys, here he come.

Heart full of fear, faculties numb.”

Twang, twang, sounded the banjo, mournfully and urgently.

Kaminsky said acutely, “I’ve been following your shows and I’ve never heard you sing that number.”

“Aw,” Rags said, “I had bad luck with that, Mr. Kaminsky. Turned out there really is a Tom McPhail. Lives in Pocatello, Idaho. I sang about ol’ Tom McPhail on my January fourteenth TV show and right away he got sore — he was listenin’ — and got a lawyer to write me.”

“Wasn’t it just a coincidence in names?” Hada said.

“Well,” Rags said, twisting about self-consciously, “it seems there really had been a fire in his home there in Pocatello, and McPhail, he got panicky and ran with a bucket to the creek, and it was ten miles off, like I said in the song.”

“Did he get back with the water in time?”

“Amazingly, he did,” Rags said.

Kaminsky said to Hada, “It would be better, on CULTURE, if this man stuck to authentic Old English ballads such as ‘Greensleeves.’ That would seem more what we want.”

Thoughtfully, Hada said to Rags, “Bad luck to pick a name for a ballad and have it turn out that such a man really exists… Have you had that sort of bad luck since?”

“Yes, I have,” Rags admitted. “I made up a ballad last week… it was about a lady, Miss Marsha Dobbs. Listen.

“All day, all night, Marsha Dobbs.

Loves a married man whose wife she robs.

Robs that wife and hearth of Jack Cooks’s heart.

Steals the husband, makes that marriage fall apart.

“That’s the first verse,” Rags explained. “It goes on for seventeen verses; tells how Marsha comes to work at Jack Cooks’s office as a secretary, goes to lunch with him, then later they meet late at —”

“Is there a moral at the end?” Kaminsky inquired.

“Oh sure,” Rags said. “Don’t take no one else’s man because if you do, heaven avenges the dishonored wife. In this case:

“Virus flu lay ‘round the corner just for Jack.

For Marsha Dobbs ‘twas to be worse, a heart attack.

Miz Cooks, the hand of heaven sought to spare.

Surrounded her, became a garment strong to wear.

Miz Cooks —”

Hada broke in over the twanging and singing. “That’s fine, Rags. That’s enough.” He glanced at Kaminsky and winced.

“And I bet it turned out,” Kaminsky said, “that there’s a real Marsha Dobbs who had an affair with her boss, Jack Cooks.”

“Right,” Rags said, nodding “No lawyer called me, but I read it in the homeopape, the New York *Times.* Marsha, she died of a heart attack, and it was actually during —” He hesitated modestly. “You know. While she and Jack Cooks were at a motel satellite, lovemaking.”

“Have you deleted that number from your repertoire?” Kaminsky asked.

“Well,” Rags said, “I can’t make up my mind. Nobody’s suing me… and I like the ballad. I think I’ll leave it in.”

To himself, Hada thought, What was it Dr. Yasumi said? That he scented psi powers of some unusual kind in Ragland Park… perhaps it’s the

parapsychological power of having the bad luck to make up ballads about people who really exist. Not much of a talent, that.

On the other hand, he realized, it could be a variant on the telepathic talent… and with a little tinkering it might be *quite* valuable.

"How long does it take you to make up a ballad?" he asked Rags.

"I can do it on the spot," Rags Park answered. "I could do it now; give me a theme and I'll compose right here in this office of yours."

Hada pondered and then said, "My wife Thelma has been feeding a gray fox that I know — or I believe — killed and ate our best Rouen duck."

After a moment of considering, Rags Park twanged:

"Miz Thelma Hada talked to the fox.

Built it a home from an old pine box.

Sebastian Hada heard a sad cluck:

Wicked gray fox had eaten his duck"

"But ducks don't cluck, they quack," Nat Kaminsky said critically.

"That's a fact," Rags admitted. He pondered and then sang:

"Hada's production chief changed my luck.

I got no job, and ducks don't cluck."

Grinning, Kaminsky said, "Okay, Rags; you win." To Hada he said, "I advise you to hire him."

“Let me ask you this,” Hada said to Rags. “Do *you* think the fox got my Rouen?”

“Gosh,” Rags said, “I don’t know anything about that.”

“But in your ballad you said so,” Hada pointed out.

“Let me think,” Rags said. Presently he twanged once more and said:

“Interesting problem Hada’s stated.

Perhaps my ability’s underrated.

Perhaps I’m not no ordinary guy.

Do I get my ballads through the use of psi?”

“How did you know I meant psi?” Hada asked. “You can read interior thoughts, can’t you? Yasumi was right.”

Rags said, “Mister, I’m just singing and twanging; I’m just an entertainer, same as Jim-Jam Briskin, that news clown President Fischer clapped in jail.”

“Are you afraid of jail?” Hada asked him bluntly.

“President Fischer doesn’t have nothing against me,” Rags said. “I don’t do political ballads.”

“If you work for me,” Hada said, “maybe you will. I’m trying to get Jim-Jam out of jail; today all my outlets began their campaign.”

“Yes, he ought to be out,” Rags agreed, nodding. “That was a bad thing, President Fischer using the FBI for that… those aliens aren’t that much of a menace.”

Kaminsky, rubbing his chin meditatively, said, “Do one on Jim-Jam Briskin, Max Fischer, the aliens - on the whole political situation. Sum it up.”

“That’s asking a lot,” Rags said, with a wry smile.

“Try,” Kaminsky said. “See how well you can epitomize.”

“Whooee,” Rags said. ” ‘Epitomize.’ Now I know I’m talking to CULTURE. Okay, Mr. Kaminsky. How’s this?” He said:

“Fat little President by name of Max.

Used his power, gave Jim the ax.

Sebastian Hada’s got eyes like a vulture.

Sees his opening, steps in with CULTURE.”

“You’re hired,” Hada said to the folksinger, and reached into his pocket for a contract form.

Kaminsky said, “Will we be successful, Mr. Park? Tell us about the outcome.”

“I’d, uh, rather not,” Rags said. “At least not this minute. You think I can also read the future, too? That I’m a precog as well as a telepath?” He laughed gently. “I’ve got plenty of talent, according to you; I’m flattered.” He bowed mockingly.

“I’ll assume that you’re coming to work for us,” Hada said. “And your willingness to be an employee of CULTURE — is it a sign that you feel President Fischer is not going to be able to get us?”

“Oh, we could be in jail, too, along with Jim-Jam,” Rags murmured. “That wouldn’t surprise me.” Seating himself, his banjo in hand, he prepared to sign the contract.

In his bedroom at the White House, President Max Fischer had listened for almost an hour now to the TV set, to CULTURE hammering away on the same topic, again and again. *Jim Briskin must be released*, the voice said; it was a smooth, professional announcer’s voice, but behind it, unheard, Max knew, was Sebastian Hada.

“Attorney General,” Max said to his cousin Leon Lait, “get me dossiers on all of Hada’s wives, all seven or eight, whatever it is. I guess I got to take a drastic course.”

When, later in the day, the eight dossiers had been put before him, he began to read carefully, chewing on his El Producto alta cigar and frowning, his lips moving with the effort of comprehending the intricate, detailed material.

Jeez, what a mess some of these dames must be, he realized. Ought to be getting chemical psychotherapy, have their brain metabolisms straightened out. But he was not displeased; it had been his hunch that a man like Sebastian Hada would attract an unstable sort of woman.

One in particular, Hada’s fourth wife, interested him. Zoe Martin Hada, thirty-one years old, now living on Io with her ten-year-old son.

Zoe Hada had definite psychotic traits.

“Attorney General,” he said to his cousin, “this dame is living on a pension supplied by the U.S. Department of Mental Health. Hada isn’t

contributing a dime to her support. You get her here to the White House, you understand? I got a job for her."

The following morning Zoe Martin Hada was brought to his office.

He saw, between the two FBI men, a scrawny woman, attractive, but with wild, animosity-filled eyes. "Hello, Mrs. Zoe Hada," Max said. "Listen, I know sumpthin' about you; you're the only genuine Mrs. Hada — the others are imposters, right? And Sebastian's done you dirt." He waited, and saw the expression on her face change.

"Yes," Zoe said. "I've been in courts for six years trying to prove what you just said. I can hardly believe it; are you really going to help me?"

"Sure," Max said. "But you got to do it my way; I mean, if you're waiting for that skunk Hada to change, you're wasting your time. About all you can do" — he paused — "is even up the score."

The violence which had left her face crept back as she understood, gradually, what he meant.

Frowning, Dr. Ito Yasumi said, "I have now made my examination, Hada." He began putting away his battery of cards. "This Rags Park is neither telepath or precog; he neither reads my mind nor cognates what is to be and, frankly, Hada, although I still sense psi power about him, I have no idea what it might be."

Hada listened in silence. Now Rags Park, this time with a guitar over his shoulder, wandered in from the other room. It seemed to amuse him that Dr. Yasumi could make nothing of him; he grinned at both of them and then seated himself. "I'm a puzzle," he said to Hada. "Either you got too much when you hired me or not enough… but you don't know which and neither does Dr. Yasumi or me."

“I want you to start at once over CULTURE,” Hada told him impatiently. “Make up and sing folk ballads that depict the unfair imprisonment and harassment of Jim-Jam Briskin by Leon Lait and his FBI. Make Lait appear a monster; make Fischer appear a scheming, greedy boob. Understand?”

“Sure,” Rags Park said, nodding. “We got to get public opinion aroused. I knew that when I signed; I ain’t just entertaining no more.”

Dr. Yasumi said to Rags, “Listen, I have favor to ask. Make up folk-style ballad telling how Jim-Jam Briskin *get out of jail.”*

Both Hada and Rags Park glanced at him.

“Not about what is,” Yasumi explained, “but about that which we want to be.”

Shrugging, Park said, “Okay.”

The door to Hada’s office burst open and the chief of his bodyguards, Dieter Saxton, put his head excitedly in. “Mr. Hada, we just gunned down a woman who was trying to get through to you with a homemade bomb. Do you have a moment to identify her? We think maybe it’s — I mean it was — one of your wives.”

“God in heaven,” Hada said, and hurried along with Saxton from the office and down the corridor.

There on the floor, near the front entrance of the demesne, lay a woman he knew. Zoe, he thought. He knelt down, touched her.

“Sorry,” Saxton mumbled. “We had to, Mr. Hada.”

“All right,” he said. “I believe you if you say so.” He greatly trusted Saxton; after all, he had to.

Saxton said, “I think from now on you better have one of us close by you at all times. I don’t mean outside your office; I mean within physical touch.”

“I wonder if Max Fischer sent her here,” Hada said.

“The chances are good,” Saxton said. “I’d make book on it.”

“Just because I’m trying to get Jim-Jam Briskin released.” Hada was thoroughly shaken. “It really amazes me.” He rose to his feet unsteadily.

“Let me go after Fischer,” Saxton urged in a low voice. “For your protection. He has no right to be President; Unicephalon 40-D is our only legal President and we all know Fischer put it out of commission.”

“No,” Hada murmured. “I don’t like murder.”

“It’s not murder,” Saxton said. “It’s protection for you and your wives and children.”

“Maybe so,” Hada said, “but I still can’t do it. At least not yet.” He left Saxton and made his way with difficulty back to his office, where Rags Park and Dr. Yasumi waited.

“We heard,” Yasumi said to him. “Bear up, Hada. The woman was a paranoid schizophrenic with delusions of persecution; without psychotherapy it was inevitable that she would meet a violent death. Do not blame yourself or Mr. Saxton.”

Hada said, “And at one time I loved that woman.”

Dolefully strumming on his guitar, Rags Park sang to himself; the words were not audible. Perhaps he was practicing on his ballad of Jim Briskin’s escape from jail.

“Take Mr. Saxton’s advice,” Dr. Yasumi said. “Protect yourself at all times.” He patted Hada on the shoulder.

Rags spoke up, “Mr. Hada, I think I’ve got my ballad now. About —”

“I don’t want to hear it,” Hada said harshly. “Not now.” He wished the two of them would leave; he wanted to be by himself.

Maybe I should fight back, he thought. Dr. Yasumi recommends it; now Dieter Saxton recommends it. What would Jim-Jam recommend? He has a sound mind… he would say, Don’t employ murder. I know that would be his answer; I know him.

And if he says not to, I won’t.

Dr. Yasumi was instructing Rags Park, “A ballad, please, about that vase of gladioli over there on the bookcase. Tell how it rise up straight in the air and hover; all right?”

“What kind of ballad is that?” Rags said. “Anyhow, I got my work cut out for me; you heard what Mr. Hada said.”

“But I’m still testing you,” Dr. Yasumi grumbled.

To his cousin the Attorney General, Max Fischer said disgustedly, “Well, we didn’t get him.”

“No, Max,” Leon Lait agreed. “He’s got good men in his employ; he’s not an individual like Briskin, he’s a whole corporation.”

Moodily, Max said, “I read a book once that said if three people are competing, eventually two of them will join together and gang up on the third one. It’s inevitable. That’s exactly what’s happened; Hada and Briskin

are buddies, and I'm alone. We have to split them apart, Leon, and get one of them on our side against the other. Once Briskin liked me. Only he disapproved of my methods."

Leon said, "Wait'll he hears about Zoe Hada trying to kill her ex-husband; then Briskin'll really disapprove of you."

"You think it's impossible to win him over now?"

"I sure do, Max. You're in a worse position than ever, regarding him. Forget about winning him over."

"There's some idea in my mind, though," Max said. "I can't quite make out what it is yet, but it has to do with freeing Jim-Jam in the hopes that he'll feel gratitude."

"You're out of your mind," Leon said. "How come you ever thought of an idea like that? It isn't like you."

"I don't know," Max groaned. "But there it is."

To Sebastian Hada, Rags Park said, "Uh, I think maybe I got me a ballad now, Mr. Hada. Like Dr. Yasumi suggested. It has to do with telling how Jim-Jam Briskin gets out of jail. You want to hear it?"

Dully, Hada nodded. "Go ahead." After all, he was paying the folksinger; he might as well get something for his money.

Twanging away, Rags sang:

"Jim-Jam Briskin languished in jail,

Couldn't find no one to put up his bail.

Blame Max Fischer! Blame Max Fischer!"

Rags explained, “That’s the chorus, ‘Blame Max Fischer!’ Okay?”

“All right,” Hada said, nodding.

“The Lord came along, said, Max, I’m mad.

Casting that man in jail, that was bad.

Blame Max Fischer! the good Lord cried.

Poor Jim Briskin, his rights denied.

Blame Max Fischer! I’m here to tell;

Good Lord say, Him go straight to hell.

Repent, Max Fischer! There’s only one route:

Get on my good side; let Jim-Jam out.”

Rags explained to Hada, “Now here’s what’s going to happen.” He cleared his throat:

“Bad Max Fischer, he saw the light,

Told Leon Lait, We got to do right.

Sent a message down to turn that key,

Open that door and let Jim-Jam free.

Old Jim Briskin saw an end to his plight;

Jail door open now, lets in the light.

“That’s all,” Rags informed Hada. “It’s a sort of holler type of folk song, a spiritual where you tap your foot. Do you like it?”

Hada managed to nod. “Oh sure. Anything’s fine.”

“Shall I tell Mr. Kaminsky you want me to air it over CULTURE?”

“Air away,” Hada said. He did not care; the death of Zoe still weighed on his mind — he felt responsible, because after all it had been his bodyguards who had done it, and the fact that Zoe had been insane, had been trying to destroy him, did not seem to matter. It was still a human life; it was still murder. “Listen,” he said to Rags on impulse, “I want you to make up another song, now.”

With sympathy, Rags said, “I know, Mr. Hada. A ballad about the sad death of your former wife Zoe. I been thinking about that and I have a ballad all ready. Listen:

“There once was a lady fair to see and hear;

Wander, spirit, over field and star,

Sorrowful, but forgiving from afar.

That spirit knows who did her in.

It was a stranger, not her kin.

It was Max Fischer who knew her not —”

Hada interrupted, “Don’t whitewash me, Rags; I’m to blame. Don’t put everything on Max as if he’s a whipping boy.”

Seated in the corner of the office, listening quietly, Dr. Yasumi now spoke up. “And also too much credit to President Fischer in your ballads, Rags. In ballad of Jim-Jam’s release from jail, you specifically give credit to Max Fischer for ethical change of heart. This will not do. The credit for

Jim-Jam's release must go to Hada. Listen, Rags; I have composed a poem for this occasion."

Dr. Yasumi chanted:

"News clown nestles not in jail.

A friend, Sebastian Hada, got him free.

He loves that friend, regards him well.

Knows whom to honor, and to seek."

"Exactly thirty-two syllables," Dr. Yasumi explained modestly. "Old-style Japanese-type haiku poetry does not have to rhyme as do U.S.-English ballads, however must get right to the point, which in this matter is all-important." To Rags he said, "You make my haiku into ballad, okay? In your typical fashion, in rhythmic, rhyming couplets, et cetera, and so on."

"I counted thirty-three syllables," Rags said. "Anyhow, I'm a creative artist; I'm not used to being told what to compose." He turned to Hada. "Who'm I working for, you or him? Not him, as far as I know."

"Do as he says," Hada told Rags. "He's a brilliant man."

Sullenly, Rags murmured, "Okay, but I didn't expect this sort of job when I signed the contract." He retired to a far corner of the office to brood, think, and compose.

"What are you involved with, here, Doctor?" Hada asked.

"We'll see," Dr. Yasumi said mysteriously. "Theory about psi power of this balladeer, here. May pay off, may not."

“You seem to feel that the exact wording of Rags’s ballads is very important,” Hada said.

“That’s right,” Dr. Yasumi agreed. “As in legal document. You wait, Hada; you find out — if I right — eventually. If I wrong, doesn’t matter anyhow.” He smiled encouragingly at Hada.

The phone in President Max Fischer’s office rang. It was the Attorney General, his cousin, calling in agitation. “Max, I went over to the federal pen where Jim-Jam is, to see about quashing the charges against him like you were talking about —” Leon hesitated. “He’s gone, Max. He’s not in there anymore.” Leon sounded wildly nervous.

“How’d he get out?” Max said, more baffled than angry.

“Art Heaviside, Hada’s attorney, found a way; I don’t know yet what it is — I have to see Circuit Court Judge Dale Winthrop, about it; he signed the release order an hour or so ago. I have an appointment with Winthrop… as soon as I’ve seen him, I’ll call you back.”

“I’ll be darned,” Max said slowly. “Well, we were too late.” He hung up the phone reflexively and then stood deep in thought. *What has Hada got going for him?* he asked himself. Something I don’t understand.

And now the thing to watch for, he realized, is Jim Briskin showing up on TV. On CULTURE’s network.

With relief he saw on the screen — not Jim Briskin but a folksinger plucking away on a banjo.

And then he realized that the folksinger was singing about *him.*

“Bad Max Fischer, he saw the light,

Told Leon Lait, We got to do right.

Sent a message down to turn that key.”

Listening, Max Fischer said aloud, “My God, that’s exactly what happened! That’s exactly what I did!” Eerie, he thought. What’s it mean, this ballad singer on CULTURE who sings about what I’m doing — secret matters that he couldn’t possibly know about!

Telepathic maybe, Max thought. That must be it.

Now the folksinger was narrating and plucking about Sebastian Hada, how Hada had been personally responsible for getting Jim-Jam Briskin out of jail. And it’s true, Max said to himself. When Leon Lait got there to the federal pen, he found Briskin gone because of Art Heaviside’s activity… I better listen pretty carefully to this singer, because for some reason he seems to know more than I do.

But the singer now had finished.

The CULTURE announcer was saying, “That was a brief interlude of political ballads by the world-renowned Ragland Park. Mr. Park, you’ll be pleased to hear, will appear on this channel every hour for five minutes of new ballads, composed here in culture’s studios for the occasion. Mr. Park will be watching the teletypers and will compose his ballads to —”

Max switched the set off then.

Like calypso, Max realized. New ballads. God, he thought dismally. Suppose Parks sings about Unicephalon 40-D coming back.

I have a feeling, he thought, *that what Ragland Park sings turns out to be true.* It’s one of those psionic talents.

And they, the opposition, are making use of this.

On the other hand, he thought, I might have a few psionic talents of my own. Because if I didn't, *I wouldn't have gotten as far as I have.*

Seated before the TV set, he switched it on once again and waited, chewing his lower lip and pondering what he should do. As yet he could come up with nothing. But I will, sooner or later, he said to himself. And before they come up with the idea of bringing Unicephalon 40-D back…

Dr. Yasumi said, "I have solved what Ragland Park's psi talent is, Hada. You care to know?"

"I'm more interested in the fact that Jim-Jam is out of jail," Hada answered. He put down the receiver of the telephone, almost unable to believe the news. "He'll be here right away," he said to Dr. Yasumi. "He's on his way direct, by monorail. We'll see that he gets to Callisto, where Max has no jurisdiction, so they can't possibly rearrest him." His mind swirled with plans. Rubbing his hands together, he said rapidly, "Jim-Jam can broadcast from our transmitter on Callisto. And he can live at my demesne there — that'll be beer and skittles for him — I know he'll agree."

"He is out," Dr. Yasumi said dryly, "because of Rags's psi talent, so you had better listen. Because this psi talent is not understood even by Rags and, honestly to God, it could rebound on you any time."

Reluctantly, Hada said, "Okay, give me your opinion."

"Relationship between Rags's made-up ballads and reality is one of cause and effect. What Rags describes then takes place. The ballad precedes the event and not by much. You see? This could be dangerous, if Rags understood it and made use of it for own advantage."

"If this is true," Hada said, "then we want him to compose a ballad about Unicephalon 40-D returning to action." That was obvious to him instantly. Max Fischer would be merely the standby President once more, as he had originally been. Without authority of any kind.

“Correct,” Dr. Yasumi said. “But problem is, now that he is making up these political-type ballads, Ragland Park is apt to discover this fact, too. For if he makes up song about Unicephalon and then it actually —”

“You’re right,” Hada said. “Even Park couldn’t miss that.” He was silent then, deep in thought. Ragland Park was potentially even more dangerous than Max Fischer. On the other hand, Ragland seemed like a good egg; there was no reason to assume that he would misuse his power, as Max Fischer had his.

But it was a great deal of power for one human being to have. Much too much.

Dr. Yasumi said, “Care must be taken as to exactly what sort of ballads Ragland makes up. Contents must be edited in advance, maybe by you.”

“I want as little as possible —” Hada began, and then ceased. The receptionist had buzzed him; he switched on the intercom.

“Mr. James Briskin is here.”

“Send him right in,” Hada said, delighted. “He’s here already, Ito.” Hada opened the door to the office — and there stood Jim-Jam, his face lined and sober.

“Mr. Hada got you out,” Dr Yasumi informed Jim-Jam.

“I know. I appreciate it, Hada.” Briskin entered the office and Hada at once closed and locked the door.

“Listen, Jim-Jam,” Hada said without preamble, “we’ve got greater problems than ever. Max Fischer as a threat is nothing. Now we have to deal with an ultimate form of power, an absolute rather than a relative form. I wish I had never gotten into this; whose idea was it to hire Rags Park?”

Dr. Yasumi said, “Yours, Hada, and I warned you at the time.”

“I’d better instruct Rags not to make up any more new ballads,” Hada decided. “That’s the first step to take. I’ll call the studio. My God, he might make up one about us all going to the bottom of the Atlantic, or twenty AUs out into deep space.”

“Avoid panic,” Dr. Yasumi told him firmly. “There you go ahead with panic, Hada. Volatile as ever. Be calm and think first.”

“How can I be calm,” Hada said, “when that rustic has the power to move us around like toys? Why, he can command the entire universe.”

“Not necessarily,” Dr. Yasumi disagreed. “There may be limit. Psi power not well understood, even yet. Hard to test out in laboratory condition; hard to subject to rigorous, repeatable scrutiny.” He pondered.

Jim Briskin said, “As I understand what you’re saying —”

“You were sprung by a made-up ballad,” Hada told him. “Done at my command. It worked, but now we’re stuck with the ballad singer.” He paced back and forth, hands in his pockets.

What’ll we do with Ragland Park? he asked himself desperately.

At the main studios of CULTURE in the Earth satellite Culone, Ragland Park sat with his banjo and guitar, examining the news dispatches coming in over the teletype and preparing ballads for his next appearance.

Jim-Jam Briskin, he saw, had been released from jail by order of a federal judge. Pleased, Ragland considered a ballad on that topic, then remembered that he had already composed — and sung — several. What he needed was a new topic entirely. He had done that one to death.

From the control booth, Nat Kaminsky's voice boomed over the loudspeaker, "You about ready to go on again, Mr. Park?"

"Oh sure," Ragland replied, nodding. Actually he was not, but he would be in a moment or two.

What about a ballad, he thought, concerning a man named Pete Robinson of Chicago, Illinois, whose springer spaniel was attacked one fine day in broad daylight on a city street by an enraged eagle?

No, that's not political enough, he decided.

What about one dealing with the end of the world? A comet hitting Earth, or maybe the aliens swarming in and taking over… a real scary ballad with people getting blown up and cut in half by ray guns?

But that was too unintellectual for CULTURE; that wouldn't do either.

Well, he thought, then a song about the FBI. I've never done one on the subject; Leon Lait's men in gray business suits with fat red necks… college graduates carrying briefcases…

To himself, he sang, while strumming his guitar:

"Our department chief says, Hark;

Go and bring back Ragland Park.

He's a menace to conformity;

His crimes are an enormity."

Chuckling, Ragland pondered how to go on with the ballad. A ballad about himself; interesting idea… how had he happened to think of that?

He was so busy concocting the ballad, in fact, that he did not notice the three men in gray business suits with fat red necks who had entered the studio and were coming toward him, each man carrying a briefcase in a way that made it clear he was a college graduate and used to carrying it.

I really have a good ballad going, Ragland said to himself. The best one of my career. Strumming, he went on:

"Yes, they sneaked up in the dark

Aimed their guns and shot poor Park.

Stilled freedom's clarion cry

When they doomed this man to die;

But a crime not soon forgotten

Even in a culture rotten."

That was as far as Ragland got in his ballad. The leader of the group of FBI men lowered his smoking pistol, nodded to his companions, and then spoke into his wrist transmitter. "Inform Mr. Lait that we have been successful."

The tinny voice from his wrist answered, "Good. Return to headquarters at once. *He* orders it."

He, of course, was Maximilian Fischer. The FBI men knew that, knew who had sent them on their mission.

In his office at the White House, Maximilian Fischer breathed a sigh of relief when informed that Ragland Park was dead. A close call, he said to himself. That man might have finished me off — me and everybody else in the world.

Amazing, he thought, that we were able to get him. The breaks certainly went our way. I wonder why.

Could be one of my psionic talents has to do with putting an end to folksingers, he said to himself, and grinned with sleek satisfaction.

Specifically, he thought, a psi talent for getting folksingers to compose ballads on the theme of their own destruction…

And now, he realized, the real problem. Of getting Jim Briskin back into jail. And it will be hard; Hada is probably smart enough to think of transporting him immediately to an outlying moon where I have no authority. It will be a long struggle, me against those two… and they could well beat me in the end.

He sighed. A lot of hard work, he said to himself. But I guess I got to do it. Picking up the phone, he dialed Leon Lait…

Oh, To Be A Blobel!

He put a twenty-dollar platinum coin into the slot and the analyst, after a pause, lit up. Its eyes shone with sociability and it swiveled about in its chair, picked up a pen and pad of long yellow paper from its desk and said, “Good morning, sir. You may begin.”

“Hello, Dr. Jones. I guess you’re not the same Dr. Jones who did the definitive biography of Freud; that was a century ago.” He laughed nervously; being a rather poverty-stricken man he was not accustomed to dealing with the new fully homeostatic psychoanalysts. “Um,” he said, “should I free-associate or give you background material or just what?”

Dr. Jones said, “Perhaps you could begin by telling me who you are und warum mich — why you have selected me.”

“I’m George Munster of catwalk 4, building WEF-395, San Francisco condominium established 1996.”

“How do you do, Mr. Munster.” Dr. Jones held out its hand, and George Munster shook it. He found the hand to be of a pleasant body-temperature and decidedly soft. The grip, however, was manly.

“You see,” Munster said, “I’m an ex-GI, a war veteran. That’s how I got my condominium apartment at WEF-395; veterans’ preference.”

“Ah yes,” Dr. Jones said, ticking faintly as it measured the passage of time. “The war with the Blobels.”

“I fought three years in that war,” Munster said, nervously smoothing his long, black, thinning hair. “I hated the Blobels and I volunteered; I was

only nineteen and I had a good job — but the crusade to clear the Sol System of Blobels came first in my mind."

"Um," Dr. Jones said, ticking and nodding.

George Munster continued, "I fought well. In fact I got two decorations and a battlefield citation. Corporal. That's because I single-handedly wiped out an observation satellite full of Blobels; we'll never know exactly how many because of course, being Blobels, they tend to fuse together and unfuse confusingly." He broke off, then, feeling emotional. Even remembering and talking about the war was too much for him… he lay back on the couch, lit a cigarette and tried to become calm.

The Blobels had emigrated originally from another star system, probably Proxima. Several thousand years ago they had settled on Mars and on Titan, doing very well at agrarian pursuits. They were developments of the original unicellular amoeba, quite large and with a highly-organized nervous system, but still amoeba, with pseudopodia, reproducing by binary fission, and in the main offensive to Terran settlers.

The war itself had broken out over ecological considerations. It had been the desire of the Foreign Aid Department of the UN to change the atmosphere on Mars, making it more usable for Terran settlers. This change, however, had made it unpalatable for the Blobel colonies already there; hence the squabble.

And, Munster reflected, it was not possible to change *half* the atmosphere of a planet, the Brownian movement being what it was. Within a period of ten years the altered atmosphere had diffused throughout the planet, bringing suffering — at least so they alleged — to the Blobels. In retaliation, a Blobel armada had approached Terra and had put into orbit a series of technically sophisticated satellites designed eventually to alter the atmosphere of Terra. This alteration had never come about because of course the War Office of the UN had gone into action; the satellites had been detonated by self-instructing missiles… and the war was on.

Dr. Jones said, “Are you married, Mr. Munster?”

“No sir,” Munster said. “And —” He shuddered. “You’ll see why when I’ve finished telling you. See, Doctor —” He stubbed out his cigarette. “I’ll be frank. I was a Terran spy. That was my task; they gave the job to me because of my bravery in the field… I didn’t ask for it.”

“I see,” Dr. Jones said.

“Do you?” Munster’s voice broke. “Do you know what was necessary in those days in order to make a Terran into a successful spy among the Blobels?”

Nodding, Dr. Jones said, “Yes, Mr. Munster. You had to relinquish your human form and assume the repellent form of a Blobel.”

Munster said nothing; he clenched and unclenched his fist, bitterly. Across from him Dr. Jones ticked.

That evening, back in his small apartment at WEF-395, Munster opened a fifth of Teacher’s scotch, sat by himself sipping from a cup, lacking even the energy to get a glass down from the cupboard over the sink.

What had he gotten out of the session with Dr. Jones today? Nothing, as nearly as he could tell. And it had eaten deep into his meager financial resources… meager because —

Because for almost twelve hours out of the day he reverted, despite all the efforts of himself and the Veterans’ Hospitalization Agency of the UN, to his old wartime Blobel shape. To a formless unicellular-like blob, right in the middle of his own apartment at WEF-395.

His financial resources consisted of a small pension from the War Office; finding a job was impossible, because as soon as he was hired the strain caused him to revert there on the spot, in plain sight of his new employer and fellow workers.

It did not assist in forming successful work-relationships.

Sure enough, now, at eight in the evening, he felt himself once more beginning to revert; it was an old and familiar experience to him, and he loathed it. Hurriedly, he sipped the last of the cup of scotch, put the cup down on a table… and felt himself slide together into a homogenous puddle.

The telephone rang.

"I can't answer," he called to it. The phone's relay picked up his anguished message and conveyed it to the calling party. Now Munster had become a single transparent gelatinous mass in the middle of the rug; he undulated toward the phone — it was still ringing, despite his statement to it, and he felt furious resentment; didn't he have enough troubles already, without having to deal with a ringing phone?

Reaching it, he extended a pseudopodium and snatched the receiver from the hook. With great effort he formed his plastic substance into the semblance of a vocal apparatus, resonating dully. "I'm busy," he resonated in a low booming fashion into the mouthpiece of the phone. "Call later." *Call*, he thought as he hung up, *tomorrow morning. When I've been able to regain my human form.*

The apartment was quiet, now.

Sighing, Munster flowed back across the carpet, to the window, where he rose into a high pillar in order to see the view beyond; there was a light-sensitive spot on his outer surface, and although he did not possess a true lens he was able to appreciate — nostalgically — the sight of San Francisco Bay, the Golden Gate Bridge, the playground for small children which was Alcatraz Island.

Dammit, he thought bitterly. *I can't marry; I can't live a genuine human existence, reverting this way to the form the War Office bigshots forced me*

into back in the war times… .

He had not known then, when he accepted the mission, that it would leave this permanent effect. They had assured him it was “only temporary, for the duration,” or some such glib phrase. *Duration my ass,* Munster thought with furious, impotent resentment. *It’s been* eleven years, *now.*

The psychological problems created for him, the pressure on his psyche, were immense. Hence his visit to Dr. Jones.

Once more the phone rang.

“Okay,” Munster said aloud, and flowed laboriously back across the room to it. “You want to talk to me?” he said as he came closer and closer; the trip, for someone in Blobel form, was a long one. “I’ll talk to you. You can even turn on the vidscreen and *look* at me.” At the phone he snapped the switch which would permit visual communication as well as auditory. “Have a good look,” he said, and displayed his amorphous form before the scanning tube of the video.

Dr. Jones’ voice came: “I’m sorry to bother you at your home, Mr. Munster, especially when you’re in this, um, awkward condition…” The homeostatic analyst paused. “But I’ve been devoting time to problem-solving vis-a-vis your condition. I may have at least a partial solution.”

“What?” Munster said, taken by surprise. “You mean to imply that medical science can now —”

“No, no,” Dr. Jones said hurriedly. “The physical aspects lie out of my domain; you must keep that in mind, Munster. When you consulted me about your problems it was the psychological adjustment that —”

“I’ll come right down to your office and talk to you,” Munster said. And then he realized that he could not; in his Blobel form it would take him days to undulate all the way across town to Dr. Jones’ office. “Jones,” he said

desperately, “you see the problems I face. I’m stuck here in this apartment every night beginning about eight o’clock and lasting through until almost seven in the morning… I can’t even visit you and consult you and get help —”

“Be quiet, Mr. Munster,” Dr. Jones interrupted. “I’m trying to tell you something. *You’re not the only one in this condition.* Did you know that?”

Heavily, Munster said, “Sure. In all, eighty-three Terrans were made over into Blobels at one time or another during the war. Of the eighty-three —” He knew the facts by heart. “Sixty-one survived and now there’s an organization called Veterans of Unnatural Wars of which fifty are members. I’m a member. We meet twice a month, revert in unison…” He started to hang up the phone. So this was what he had gotten for his money, this stale news. “Goodbye, Doctor,” he murmured.

Dr. Jones whirred in agitation. “Mr. Munster, I don’t mean other Terrans. I’ve researched this in your behalf, and I discover that according to captured records at the Library of Congress fifteen *Blobels* were formed into pseudo-Terrans to act as spies for *their* side. Do you understand?”

After a moment Munster said, “Not exactly.”

“You have a mental block against being helped,” Dr. Jones said. “But here’s what I want, Munster; you be at my office at eleven in the morning tomorrow. We’ll take up the solution to your problem then. Goodnight.”

Wearily, Munster said, “When I’m in my Blobel form my wits aren’t too keen, Doctor. You’ll have to forgive me.” He hung up, still puzzled. So there were fifteen Blobels walking around on Titan this moment, doomed to occupy human forms — so what? How did that help him? Maybe he would find out at eleven tomorrow.

When he strode into Dr. Jones’ waiting room he saw, seated in a deep chair in a corner by a lamp, reading a copy of *Fortune,* an exceedingly

attractive young woman.

Automatically, Munster found a place to sit from which he could eye her. Stylish dyed-white hair braided down the back of her neck… he took in the sight of her with delight, pretending to read his own copy *of Fortune.* Slender legs, small and delicate elbows. And her sharp, clearly-featured face. The intelligent eyes, the thin, tapered nostrils — a truly lovely girl, he thought. He drank in the sight of her… until all at once she raised her head and stared coolly back at him.

"Dull, having to wait," Munster mumbled.

The girl said, "Do you come to Dr. Jones often?"

"No," he admitted. "This is just the second time."

"I've never been here before," the girl said. "I was going to another electronic fully-homeostatic psychoanalyst in Los Angeles and then late yesterday Dr. Bing, my analyst, called me and told me to fly up here and see Dr. Jones this morning. Is this one good?"

"Um," Munster said. "I guess so." *We'll see,* he thought. *That's precisely what we don't know, at this point.*

The inner office door opened and there stood Dr. Jones. "Miss Arrasmith," it said, nodding to the girl. "Mr. Munster." It nodded to George. "Won't you both come in?"

Rising to her feet, Miss Arrasmith said, "Who pays the twenty dollars then?"

But the analyst had become silent; it had turned off.

"I'll pay," Miss Arrasmith said, reaching into her purse.

“No, no,” Munster said. “Let me.” He got out a twenty-dollar piece and dropped it into the analyst’s slot.

At once, Dr. Jones said, “You’re a gentleman, Mr. Munster.” Smiling, it ushered the two of them into its office. “Be seated, please. Miss Arrasmith, without preamble please allow me to explain your — condition to Mr. Munster.” To Munster it said, “Miss Arrasmith is a Blobel.”

Munster could only stare at the girl.

“Obviously,” Dr. Jones continued, “presently in human form. This, for her, is the state of involuntary reversion. During the war she operated behind Terran lines, acting for the Blobel War League. She was captured and held, but then the war ended and she was neither tried nor sentenced.”

“They released me,” Miss Arrasmith said in a low, carefully-controlled voice. “Still in human form. I stayed here out of shame. I just couldn’t go back to Titan and —” Her voice wavered.

“There is great shame attached to this condition,” Dr. Jones said, “for any high-caste Blobel.”

Nodding, Miss Arrasmith sat, clutching a tiny Irish linen handkerchief and trying to look poised. “Correct, Doctor. I did visit Titan to discuss my condition with medical authorities there. After expensive and prolonged therapy with me they were able to induce a return to my natural form for a period of —” She hesitated. “About one-fourth of the time. But the other three-fourths… I am as you perceive me now.” She ducked her head and touched the handkerchief to her right eye.

“Jeez,” Munster protested, “you’re lucky; a human form is infinitely superior to a Blobel form - I ought to know. As a Blobel you have to creep along… you’re like a big jellyfish, no skeleton to keep you erect. And binary fission — it’s lousy, I say really lousy, compared to the Terran form of — you know. Reproduction.” He colored.

Dr. Jones ticked and stated, “For a period of about six hours your human forms overlap. And then for about one hour your Blobel forms overlap. So all in all, the two of you possess seven hours out of twenty-four in which you both possess identical forms. In my opinion —” It toyed with its pen and paper. “Seven hours is not too bad. If you follow my meaning.”

After a moment Miss Arrasmith said, “But Mr. Munster and I are natural enemies.”

“That was years ago,” Munster said.

“Correct,” Dr. Jones agreed. “True, Miss Arrasmith is basically a Blobel and you, Munster, are a Terran, but —” It gestured. “Both of you are outcasts in either civilization; both of you are stateless and hence gradually suffering a loss of ego-identity. I predict for both of you a gradual deterioration ending finally in severe mental illness. Unless you two can develop a rapprochement.” The analyst was silent, then.

Miss Arrasmith said softly, “I think we’re very lucky, Mr. Munster. As Dr. Jones said, we do overlap for seven hours a day… we can enjoy that time together, no longer in wretched isolation.” She smiled up hopefully at him, rearranging her coat. Certainly, she had a nice figure; the somewhat low-cut dress gave an ideal clue to that.

Studying her, Munster pondered.

“Give him time,” Dr. Jones told Miss Arrasmith. “My analysis of him is that he will see this correctly and do the right thing.”

Still rearranging her coat and dabbing at her large, dark eyes, Miss Arrasmith waited.

The phone in Dr. Jones’ office rang, a number of years later. He answered it in his customary way. “Please, sir or madam, deposit twenty dollars if you wish to speak to me.”

A tough male voice on the other end of the line said, “Listen, this is the UN Legal Office and we don’t deposit twenty dollars to talk to anybody. So trip that mechanism inside you, Jones.”

“Yes, sir,” Dr. Jones said, and with his right hand tripped the lever behind his ear that caused him to come on free.

“Back in 2037,” the UN legal expert said, “did you advise a couple to marry? A George Munster and a Vivian Arrasmith, now Mrs. Munster?”

“Why yes,” Dr. Jones said, after consulting his built-in memory banks.

“Had you investigated the legal ramifications of their issue?”

“Um well,” Dr. Jones said, “that’s not my worry.”

“You can be arraigned for advising any action contrary to UN law.”

“There’s no law prohibiting a Blobel and a Terran from marrying.”

The UN legal expert said, “All right, Doctor, I’ll settle for a look at their case histories.”

“Absolutely not,” Dr. Jones said. “That would be a breach of ethics.”

“We’ll get a writ and sequester them, then.”

“Go ahead.” Dr. Jones reached behind his ear to shut himself off.

“Wait. It may interest you to know that the Munsters now have four children. And, following the Mendelian Law, the offspring comprise a strict one, two, one ratio. One Blobel girl, one hybrid boy, one hybrid girl, one Terran girl. The legal problem arises in that the Blobel Supreme Council

claims the pure-blooded Blobel girl as a citizen of Titan and also suggests that one of the two hybrids be donated to the Council's jurisdiction." The UN legal expert explained, "You see, the Munsters' marriage is breaking up; they're getting divorced and it's sticky finding which laws obtain regarding them and their issue."

"Yes," Dr. Jones admitted, "I would think so. What has caused their marriage to break up?"

"I don't know and don't care. Possibly the fact that both adults and two of the four children rotate daily between being Blobels and Terrans; maybe the strain got to be too much. If you want to give them psychological advice, consult them. Goodbye." The UN legal expert rang off.

Did I make a mistake, advising them to marry? Dr. Jones asked itself. *I wonder if I shouldn 't look them up; I owe at least that to them.*

Opening the Los Angeles phone book, it began thumbing through the Ms.

These had been six difficult years for the Munsters.

First, George had moved from San Francisco to Los Angeles; he and Vivian had set up a household in a condominium apartment with three instead of two rooms. Vivian, being in Terran form three-fourths of the time, had been able to obtain a job; right out in public she gave jet flight information at the Fifth Los Angeles Airport. George, however —

His pension comprised an amount only one-fourth that of his wife's salary and he felt it keenly. To augment it, he had searched for a way of earning money at home. Finally in a magazine he had found this valuable ad:

MAKE SWIFT PROFITS IN YOUR OWN CONDO!

RAISE GIANT BULLFROGS FROM JUPITER, CAPABLE OF EIGHTY-FOOT LEAPS.

CAN BE USED IN FROG-RACING (where legal) AND…

So in 2038 he had bought his first pair of frogs imported from Jupiter and had begun raising them for swift profits, right in his own condominium apartment building, in a corner of the basement that Leopold, the partially-homeostatic janitor, let him use gratis.

But in the relatively feeble Terran gravity the frogs were capable of enormous leaps, and the basement proved too small for them; they ricocheted from wall to wall like green ping pong balls and soon died. Obviously it took more than a portion of the basement at QEK-604 Apartments to house a crop of the damned things, George realized.

And then, too, their first child had been born. It had turned out to be a pure-blooded Blobel; for twenty-four hours a day it consisted of a gelatinous mass and George found himself waiting in vain for it to switch over to a human form, even for a moment.

He faced Vivian defiantly in this matter, during a period when both of them were in human form.

“How can I consider it my child?” he asked her. “It’s — an alien life form to me.” He was discouraged and even horrified. “Dr. Jones should have foreseen this; maybe it’s *your* child — it looks just like you.”

Tears filled Vivian’s eyes. “You mean that insultingly.”

“Damn right I do. We fought you creatures — we used to consider you no better than Portuguese sting-rays.” Gloomily, he put on his coat. “I’m going down to Veterans of Unnatural Wars Headquarters,” he informed his wife. “Have a beer with the boys.” Shortly, he was on his way to join with his old wartime buddies, glad to get out of the apartment house.

VUW Headquarters was a decrepit cement building in downtown Los Angeles left over from the twentieth century and sadly in need of paint. The VUW had little funds because most of its members were, like George Munster, living on UN pensions. However, there was a pool table and an old 3-D television set and a few dozen tapes of popular music and also a chess set. George generally drank his beer and played chess with his fellow members, either in human form or in Blobel form; this was one place in which both were accepted.

This particular evening he sat with Pete Ruggles, a fellow veteran who also had married a Blobel female, reverting, as Vivian did, to human form.

"Pete, I can't go on. I've got a gelatinous blob for a child. My whole life I've wanted a kid, and now what have I got? Something that looks like it washed up on the beach."

Sipping his beer — he too was in human form at the moment — Pete answered, "Criminy, George, I admit it's a mess. But you must have known what you were getting into when you married her. And my God, according to Mendel's Law, the next kid —"

"I mean," George broke in, "I don't respect my own wife; that's the basis of it. I think of her as a *thing.* And myself, too. We're both things." He drank down his beer in one gulp.

Pete said meditatively, "But from the Blobel standpoint —"

"Listen, whose side are you on?" George demanded.

"Don't yell at me," Pete said, "or I'll deck you."

A moment later they were swinging wildly at each other. Fortunately Pete reverted to Blobel form in the nick of time; no harm was done. Now George sat alone, in human shape, while Pete oozed off somewhere else, probably to join a group of the boys who had also assumed Blobel form.

Maybe we can find a new society somewhere on a remote moon, George said to himself moodily. *Neither Terran nor Blobel.*

I've got to go back to Vivian, George resolved. *What else is there for me? I'm lucky to find her; I'd be nothing but a war veteran guzzling beer here at VUW Headquarters every damn day and night, with no future, no hope, no real life…*

He had a new money-making scheme going now. It was a home mail-order business; he had placed an ad in the *Saturday Evening Post* for MAGIC LODE-STONES REPUTED TO BRING YOU LUCK. FROM ANOTHER STAR-SYSTEM entirely! The stones had come from Proxima and were obtainable on Titan; it was Vivian who had made the commercial contact for him with her people. But so far, few people had sent in the dollar-fifty.

I'm a failure, George said to himself.

Fortunately the next child, born in the winter of 2039, showed itself to be a hybrid; it took human form fifty percent of the time, and so at last George had a child who was — occasionally, anyhow — a member of his own species.

He was still in the process of celebrating the birth of Maurice when a delegation of their neighbors at QEK-604 Apartments came and rapped on their door.

"We've got a petition here," the chairman of the delegation said, shuffling his feet in embarrassment, "asking that you and Mrs. Munster leave QEK-604."

"But why?" George asked, bewildered. "You haven't objected to us up until now."

“The reason is that now you’ve got a hybrid youngster who will want to play with ours, and we feel it’s unhealthy for our kids to —”

George slammed the door in their faces.

But still, he felt the pressure, the hostility from the people on all sides of them. *And to think*, he thought bitterly, *that I fought in the war to save these people. It sure wasn ‘t worth it.*

An hour later he was down at VUW Headquarters once more, drinking beer and talking with his buddy Sherman Downs, also married to a Blobel.

“Sherman, it’s no good. We’re not wanted; we’ve got to emigrate. Maybe we’ll try it on Titan, in Viv’s world.”

“Chrissakes,” Sherman protested, “I hate to see you fold up, George. Isn’t your electromagnetic reducing belt beginning to sell, finally?”

For the last few months, George had been making and selling a complex electronic reducing gadget which Vivian had helped him design; it was based in principle on a Blobel device popular on Titan but unknown on Terra. And this had gone over well; George had more orders than he could fill. But —

“I had a terrible experience, Sherm,” George confided. “I was in a drugstore the other day, and they gave me a big order for my reducing belt, and I got so excited —” He broke off. “You can guess what happened. I reverted. Right in plain sight of a hundred customers. And when the buyer saw that he canceled the order for the belts. It was what we all fear… you should have seen how their attitude toward me changed.”

Sherm said, “Hire someone to do your selling for you. A full-blooded Terran.”

Thickly, George said, *"I'm* a full-blooded Terran, and don't you forget it. Ever."

"I just mean —"

"I know what you meant," George said. And took a swing at Sherman. Fortunately he missed and in the excitement both of them reverted to Blobel form. They oozed angrily into each other for a time, but at last fellow veterans managed to separate them.

"I'm as much Terran as anyone," George thought-radiated in the Blobel manner to Sherman. "And I'll flatten anyone who says otherwise."

In Blobel form he was unable to get home; he had to phone Vivian to come and get him. It was humiliating.

Suicide, he decided. *That's the answer.*

How best to do it? In Blobel form he was unable to feel pain; best to do it then. Several substances would dissolve him… he could for instance drop himself into a heavily-chlorinated swimming pool, such as QEK-604 maintained in its recreation room.

Vivian, in human form, found him as he reposed hesitantly at the edge of the swimming pool, late one night.

"George, I beg you — go back to Dr. Jones."

"Naw," he boomed dully, forming a quasi-vocal apparatus with a portion of his body. "It's no use, Viv. I don't *want* to go on." Even the belts; they had been Viv's idea, rather than his. He was second even there… behind her, falling constantly farther behind each passing day.

Viv said, "You have so much to offer the children."

That was true. “Maybe I’ll drop over to the UN War Office,” he decided. “Talk to them, see if there’s anything new that medical science has come up with that might stabilize me.”

“But if you stabilize as a Terran,” Vivian said, “what would become of me?”

“We’d have *eighteen entire hours* together a day. All the hours you take human form!”

“But you wouldn’t want to stay married to me. Because, George, then you could meet a Terran woman.”

It wasn’t fair to her, he realized. So he abandoned the idea.

In the spring of 2041 their third child was born, also a girl, and like Maurice a hybrid. It was Blobel at night and Terran by day.

Meanwhile, George found a solution to some of his problems.

He got himself a mistress.

He and Nina arranged to meet each other at the Hotel Elysium, a rundown wooden building in the heart of Los Angeles.

“Nina,” George said, sipping Teacher’s scotch and seated beside her on the shabby sofa which the hotel provided, “you’ve made my life worth living again.” He fooled with the buttons of her blouse.

“I respect you,” Nina Glaubman said, assisting him with the buttons. “In spite of the fact — well, you are a former enemy of our people.”

“God,” George protested, “we must not think about the old days — we have to close our minds to our pasts.” *Nothing but our future*, he thought.

His reducing belt enterprise had developed so well that now he employed fifteen full-time Terran employees and owned a small, modern factory on the outskirts of San Fernando. If UN taxes had been reasonable he would by now be a wealthy man… brooding on that, George wondered what the tax rate was in Blobel-run lands, on Io, for instance. Maybe he ought to look into it.

One night at VUW Headquarters he discussed the subject with Reinholt, Nina's husband, who of course was ignorant of the modus vivendi between George and Nina.

"Reinholt," George said with difficulty, as he drank his beer, "I've got big plans. This cradle-to-grave socialism the UN operates… it's not for me. It's cramping me. The Munster Magic Magnetic Belt is —" He gestured. "More than Terran civilization can support. You get me?"

Coldly, Reinholt said, "But George, you are a Terran; if you emigrate to Blobel-run territory with your factory you'll be betraying your —"

"Listen," George told him, "I've got one authentic Blobel child, two half-Blobel children, and a fourth on the way. I've got strong *emotional* ties with those people out there on Titan and Io."

"You're a traitor," Reinholt said, and punched him in the mouth. "And not only that," he continued, punching George in the stomach, "you're running around with my wife. I'm going to kill you."

To escape, George reverted to Blobel form; Reinholt's blows passed harmlessly deep into his moist, jelly-like substance. Reinholt then reverted too, and flowed into him murderously, trying to consume and absorb George's nucleus.

Fortunately fellow veterans pried their two bodies apart before any permanent harm was done.

Later that night, still trembling, George sat with Vivian in the living room of their eight-room suite at the great new condominium apartment building ZGF-900. It had been a close call, and now of course Reinholt would tell Viv; it was only a question of time. The marriage, as far as George could see, was over. This perhaps was their last moment together.

"Viv," he said urgently, "you have to believe me; I love you. You and the children — plus the belt business, naturally — are my complete life." A desperate idea came to him. "Let's emigrate now, tonight. Pack up the kids and go to Titan, right this minute."

"I can't go," Vivian said. "I know how my people would treat me, and treat you and the children, too. George, *you go.* Move the factory to Io. I'll stay here." Tears filled her dark eyes.

"Hell," George said, "what kind of life is that? With you on Terra and me on Io — that's no marriage. And who'll get the kids?" Probably Viv would get them… but his firm employed top legal talent — perhaps he could use it to solve his domestic problems.

The next morning Vivian found out about Nina. And hired an attorney of her own.

"Listen," George said, on the phone talking to his top legal talent, Henry Ramarau. "Get me custody of the fourth child; it'll be a Terran. And we'll compromise on the two hybrids; I'll take Maurice and she can have Kathy. And naturally she gets that blob, the first so-called child. As far as I'm concerned it's hers anyhow." He slammed the receiver down and then turned to the board of directors of his company. "Now where were we?" he demanded. "In our analysis of Io tax laws."

During the next weeks the idea of a move to Io appeared more and more feasible from a profit and loss standpoint.

“Go ahead and buy land on Io,” George instructed his business agent in the field, Tom Hendricks. “And get it cheap; we want to start right.” To his secretary, Miss Nolan, he said, “Now keep everyone out of my office until further notice. I feel a attack coming on. From anxiety over this major move off Terra to Io.” He added, “And personal worries.”

“Yes, Mr. Munster,” Miss Nolan said, ushering Tom Hendricks out of George’s private office. “No one will disturb you.” She could be counted on to keep everyone out while George reverted to his wartime Blobel shape, as he often did, these days; the pressure on him was immense.

When, later in the day, he resumed human form, George learned from Miss Nolan that a Doctor Jones had called.

“I’ll be damned,” George said, thinking back to six years ago. “I thought it’d be in the junk pile by now.” To Miss Nolan he said, “Call Doctor Jones, notify me when you have it; I’ll take a minute off to talk to it.” It was like old times, back in San Francisco.

Shortly, Miss Nolan had Dr. Jones on the line.

“Doctor,” George said, leaning back in his chair and swiveling from side to side and poking at an orchid on his desk. “Good to hear from you.”

The voice of the homeostatic analyst came in his ear, “Mr. Munster, I note that you now have a secretary.”

“Yes,” George said, “I’m a tycoon. I’m in the reducing belt game; it’s somewhat like the flea-collar that cats wear. Well, what can I do for you?”

“I understand you have four children now —”

“Actually three, plus a fourth on the way. Listen, that fourth, Doctor, is vital to me; according to Mendel’s Law it’s a full-blooded Terran and by God I’m doing everything in my power to get custody of it.” He added,

“Vivian — you remember her — is now back on Titan. Among her own people, where she belongs. And I’m putting some of the finest doctors I can get on my payroll to stabilize me; I’m tired of this constant reverting, night and day; I’ve got too much to do for such nonsense.”

Dr. Jones said, “From your tone I can see you’re an important, busy man, Mr. Munster. You’ve certainly risen in the world, since I saw you last.”

“Get to the point,” George said impatiently. “Why’d you call?”

“I, um, thought perhaps I could bring you and Vivian together again.”

“Bah,” George said contemptuously. “That woman? Never. Listen, Doctor, I have to ring off; we’re in the process of finalizing on some basic business strategy, here at Munster, Incorporated.”

“Mr. Munster,” Dr. Jones asked, “is there another woman?”

“There’s another Blobel,” George said, “if that’s what you mean.” And he hung up the phone. *Two Blobels are better than none,* he said to himself. *And now back to business…* He pressed a button on his desk and at once Miss Nolan put her head into the office. “Miss Nolan,” George said, “get me Hank Ramarau; I want to find out —”

“Mr. Ramarau is waiting on the other line,” Miss Nolan said. “He says it’s urgent.”

Switching to the other line, George said, “Hi, Hank. What’s up?”

“I’ve just discovered,” his top legal advisor said, “that to operate your factory on Io you must be a citizen of Titan.”

“We ought to be able to fix that up,” George said.

“But to be a citizen of Titan —” Ramarau hesitated. “I’ll break it to you easy as I can, George. You have to be a Blobel.”

“Dammit, I am a Blobel,” George said. “At least part of the time. Won’t that do?”

“No,” Ramarau said, “I checked into that, knowing of your affliction, and it’s got to be one hundred percent of the time. Night *and* day.”

“Hmmm,” George said. “This is bad. But we’ll overcome it, somehow. Listen, Hank, I’ve got an appointment with Eddy Fullbright, my medical coordinator; I’ll talk to you after, okay?” He rang off and then sat scowling and rubbing his jaw. *Well,* he decided, *if it has to be it has to be. Facts are facts, and we can’t let them stand in our way.*

Picking up the phone he dialed his doctor, Eddy Fullbright.

The twenty-dollar platinum coin rolled down the chute and tripped the circuit. Dr. Jones came on, glanced up and saw a stunning, sharp-breasted young woman whom it recognized — by means of a quick scan of its memory banks — as Mrs. George Munster, the former Vivian Arrasmith.

“Good day, Vivian,” Dr. Jones said cordially. “But I understood you were on Titan.” It rose to its feet, offering her a chair.

Dabbing at her large, dark eyes, Vivian sniffled, “Doctor, everything is collapsing around me. My husband is having an affair with another woman… all I know is that her name is Nina and all the boys down at VUW Headquarters are talking about it. Presumably she’s a Terran. We’re both filing for divorce. And we’re having a dreadful legal battle over the children.” She arranged her coat modestly. “I’m expecting. Our fourth.”

“This I know,” Dr. Jones said. “A full-blooded Terran this time, if Mendel’s Law holds… although it only applied to litters.”

Mrs. Munster said miserably, “I’ve been on Titan talking to legal and medical experts, gynecologists, and especially marital guidance counselors; I’ve had all sorts of advice during the past month. Now I’m back on Terra but I can’t find George — he’s *gone!”*

“I wish I could help you, Vivian,” Dr. Jones said. “I talked to your husband briefly, the other day, but he spoke only in generalities… evidently he’s such a big tycoon now that it’s hard to approach him.”

“And to think,” Vivian sniffled, “that he achieved it all because of an idea *I* gave him. A Blobel idea.”

“The ironies of fate,” Dr. Jones said. “Now, if you want to keep your husband, Vivian —”

“I’m determined to keep him, Doctor Jones. Frankly I’ve undergone therapy on Titan, the latest and most expensive… it’s because I love George so much, even more than I love my own people or my planet.”

“Eh?” Dr. Jones said.

“Through the most modern developments in medical science in the Sol System,” Vivian said, “I’ve been stabilized, Doctor Jones. Now I am in human form twenty-four hours a day instead of eighteen. I’ve renounced my natural form in order to keep my marriage with George.”

“The supreme sacrifice,” Dr. Jones said, touched.

“Now, if I can only *find* him, Doctor —”

At the ground-breaking ceremonies on Io, George Munster flowed gradually to the shovel, extended a pseudopodium, seized the shovel, and with it managed to dig a symbolic amount of soil. “This is a great day,” he boomed hollowly, by means of the semblance of a vocal apparatus into

which he had fashioned the slimy, plastic substance which made up his unicellular body.

“Right, George,” Hank Ramarau agreed, standing nearby with the legal documents.

The Ionan official, like George a great transparent blob, oozed across to Ramarau, took the documents and boomed, “These will be transmitted to my government. I’m sure they’re in order, Mr. Ramarau.”

“I guarantee you,” Ramarau said to the official, “Mr. Munster does not revert to human form at any time; he’s made use of some of the most advanced techniques in medical science to achieve this stability at the unicellular phase of his former rotation. Munster would never cheat.”

“This historic moment,” the great blob that was George Munster thought-radiated to the throng of local Blobels attending the ceremonies, “means a higher standard of living for Ionans who will be employed; it will bring prosperity to this area, plus a proud sense of national achievement in the manufacture of what we recognize to be a native invention, the Munster Magic Magnetic Belt.”

The throng of Blobels thought-radiated cheers.

“This is a proud day in my life,” George Munster informed them, and began to ooze by degrees back to his car, where his chauffeur waited to drive him to his permanent hotel room at Io City.

Someday he would own the hotel. He was putting the profits from his business in local real estate; it was the patriotic — and the profitable — thing to do, other Ionans, other Blobels, had told him.

“I’m finally a successful man,” George Munster thought-radiated to all close enough to pick up his emanations.

Amid frenzied cheers he oozed up the ramp and into his Titan-made car.

Notes

All notes in italics are by Philip K. Dick. The year when the note was written appears in parentheses following the note. Most of these notes were written as story notes for the collections THE BEST OF PHILIP K. DICK (published 1977) and THE GOLDEN MAN (published 1980). A few were written at the request of editors publishing or reprinting a PKD story in a book or magazine.

When there is a date following the name of a story, it is the date the manuscript of that story was first received by Dick's agent, per the records of the Scott Meredith Literary Agency. Absence of a date means no record is available. The name of a magazine followed by a month and year indicates the first published appearance of a story. An alternate name following a story indicates Dick's original name for the story, as shown in the agency records.

These five volumes include all of Philip K. Dick's short fiction, with the exception of short novels later published as or included in novels, childhood writings, and unpublished writings for which manuscripts have not been found. The stories are arranged as closely as possible in chronological order of composition; research for this chronology was done by Gregg Rickman and Paul Williams.

AUTOFAC 10/11/54. *Galaxy,* Nov 1955.

Tom Disch said of this story that it was one of the earliest ecology warnings in sf. What I had in mind in writing it, however, was the thought that if factories became fully automated, they might begin to show the instinct for survival which organic living entities have… and perhaps develop similar solutions. (1976)

SERVICE CALL 10/11/54. *Science Fiction Stories, July* 1955.

When this story appeared many fans objected to it because of the negative attitude I expressed in it. But I was already beginning to suppose in my head the growing domination of machines over man, especially the machines we voluntarily surround ourselves with, which should, by logic, be the most harmless. I never assumed that some huge clanking monster would stride down Fifth Avenue, devouring New York; I always feared that my own TV set or iron or toaster would, in the privacy of my apartment, when no one else was around to help me, announce to me that they had taken over, and here was a list of rules I was to obey. I never like the idea of doing what a machine says. I hate having to salute something built in a factory. (Do you suppose all those White House tapes came out of the back of the President's head? And programmed him as to what he was to say and do?) (1976)

CAPTIVE MARKET 10/18/54. *If,* April 1955.

THE MOLD OF YANCY 10/18/54. *If,* Aug 1955.

Obviously, Yancy is based on President Eisenhower. During his reign we all were worrying about the man-in-the-gray-flannel-suit problem; we feared that the entire country was turning into one person and a whole lot of clones. (Although in those days the word "clone" was unknown to us.) I liked this story enough to use it as the basis for my novel THE PENULTIMATE TRUTH; in particular the part where everything the government tells you is a lie. I still like that part; I mean, I still believe it's so. Watergate, of course, bore the basic idea of this story out. (1978)

THE MINORITY REPORT 12/22/54. *Fantastic Universe,* Jan 1956.

RECALL MECHANISM. *If,* July 1959.

THE UNRECONSTRUCTED M 6/2/55. *Science Fiction Stories,* Jan 1957.

If the main theme throughout my writing is, "Can we consider the universe real, and if so, in what way?" my secondary theme would be, "Are we all humans?"Here a machine does not imitate a human being, but instead fakes evidence of *a human being, a given human being. Fakery is a*

topic which absolutely fascinates me; I am convinced that anything can be faked, or anyhow evidence pointing to any given thing. Spurious clues can lead us to believe anything they *want us to believe. There is really no theoretical upper limit to this. Once you have mentally opened the door to the reception of the notion of* fake*, you are ready to think yourself into another kind of reality entirely. It's a trip from which you never return. And, I think, a healthy trip… unless you take it too seriously.* (1978)

EXPLORERS WE 5/6/58. *Fantasy & Science Fiction*, Jan 1959.

WAR GAME ("Diversion") 10/31/58. *Galaxy*, Dec 1959.

IF THERE WERE NO BENNY CEMOLI ("Had There Never Been A Benny Cemoli") 2/27/63. *Galaxy*, Dec 1963.

I have always believed that at least half the famous people in history never existed. You invent what you need to invent. Perhaps even Karl Marx was invented, the product of some hack writer. In which case — (1976)

NOVELTY ACT ("At Second Jug") 3/23/63. *Fantastic*, Feb 1964. [Included in PKD's novel THE SIMULACRA.]

WATERSPIDER 4/10/63. *If*, Jan 1964.

WHAT THE DEAD MEN SAY ("Man With a Broken Match") 4/15/63. *Worlds of Tomorrow, June* 1964.

ORPHEUS WITH CLAY FEET 4/16/63 [published in *Escapade* circa 1964 under the pseudonym Jack Dowland].

THE DAYS OF PERKY PAT ("In the Days of Perky Pat") *4/18/63. Amazing*, Dec 1963.

The Days of Perky Pat *came to me in one lightning-swift flash when I saw my children playing with Barbie dolls. Obviously these anatomically super-developed dolls were not intended for the use of children, or, more accurately, should not have been. Barbie and Ken consisted of two adults in*

miniature. The idea was that the purchase of countless new clothes for these dolls was necessary if Barbie and Ken were to live in the style to which they were accustomed. I had visions of Barbie coming into my bedroom at night and saying, "I need a mink coat." Or, even worse, "Hey, big fellow… want to take a drive to Vegas in my Jaguar XKE?" I was afraid my wife would find me and Barbie together and my wife would shoot me.

The sale of The Days of Perky Pat *to* Amazing *was a good one because in those days Cele Goldsmith edited* Amazing *and she was one of the best editors in the field. Avram Davidson at* Fantasy & Science Fiction *had turned it down, but later he told me that had he known about Barbie dolls he probably would have bought it. I could not imagine anyone not knowing about Barbie. I had to deal with her and her expensive purchases constantly. It was as bad as keeping my TV set working; the TV set always needed something and so did Barbie. I always felt that Ken should buy his own clothes.*

In those days — the early Sixties — I wrote a great deal, and some of my best stories and novels emanated from that period. My wife wouldn't let me work in the house, so I rented a little shack for $25 a month and walked over to it each morning. This was out in the country. All I saw on my walk to my shack were a few cows in their pastures and my own flock of sheep who never did anything but trudge along after the bell-sheep. I was terribly lonely, shut up by myself in my shack all day. Maybe I missed Barbie, who was back at the big house with the children. So perhaps The Days of Perky Pat *is a wishful fantasy on my part; I would have loved to see Barbie — or Perky Pat or Connie Companion — show up at the door of my shack.*

What did show up was something awful: my vision of the face of Palmer Eldritch which became the basis of the novel THE THREE STIGMATA OF PALMER ELDRITCH which the Perky Pat story generated.

There I went, one day, walking down the country road to my shack, looking forward to eight hours of writing, in total isolation from all other humans, and I looked up at the sky and saw a face. I didn't really see it, but the face was there, and it was not a human face; it was a vast visage of

perfect evil. I realize now (and I think I dimly realized at the time) what caused me to see it: the months of isolation, of deprivation of human contact, in fact sensory deprivation as such… anyhow the visage could not be denied. It was immense; it filled a quarter of the sky. It had empty slots for eyes — it was metal and cruel and, worst of all, it was God.

I drove over to my church, Saint Columbia's Episcopal Church, and talked to my priest. He came to the conclusion that I had had a glimpse of Satan and gave me unction — not supreme unction; just healing unction. It didn't do any good; the metal face in the sky remained. I had to walk along every day as it gazed down at me.

Years later — after I had long since written THE THREE STIGMATA OF PALMER ELDRITCH and sold it to Doubleday, my first sale to Doubleday — I came across a picture of the face in an issue of Life *magazine. It was, very simply, a World War One observation cupola on the Marne, built by the French. My father had fought in the Second Battle of the Marne; he had been with the Fifth Marines, about the first group of American soldiers to go over to Europe and fight in that ghastly war. When I was a very small child he had showed me his uniform and gasmask, the entire gas-filtration equipment, and told me how the soldiers became panic-stricken during gas attacks as the charcoal in their filtration systems became saturated, and how sometimes a soldier would freak and tear off his mask and run. As a child I felt a lot of anxiety listening to my father's war stories and looking at and playing with the gasmask and helmet; but what scared me the most was when my father would put on the gasmask. His face would disappear. This was not my father any longer. This was not a human being at all. I was only four years old. After that my mother and father got divorced and I did not see my father for years. But the sight of him wearing his gasmask, blending as it did with his accounts of men with their guts hanging from them, men destroyed by shrapnel — decades later, in 1963, as I walked alone day after day along that country road with no one to talk to, no one to be with, that metal, blind, inhuman visage appeared to me again, but now transcendent and vast, and absolutely evil.*

I decided to exorcise it by writing about it, and I did write about it, and it did go away. But I had seen the evil one himself, and I said then and say

now, "The evil one wears a metal face." If you want to see this yourself, look at a picture of the war masks of the Attic Greeks. When men wish to inspire terror and kill they put on such metal faces. The invading Christian knights that Alexander Nevsky fought wore such masks; if you saw Eisenstein's film you know what I am talking about. They all looked alike. *I had not seen* Nevsky *when I wrote THE THREE STIGMATA, but I saw it later and saw again the thing that had hung in the sky back in 1963, the thing into which my own father had been transformed when I was a child.*

So THE THREE STIGMATA is a novel that came out of powerful atavistic fears in me, fears dating back to my early childhood and no doubt connected with my grief and loneliness when my father left my mother and me. In the novel my father appears as both Palmer Eldritch (the evil father, the diabolic mask-father) and as Leo Bulero, the tender, gruff, warm, human, loving man. The novel which emerged came out of the most intense anguish possible; in 1963 I was reliving the original isolation I had experienced upon the loss of my father, and the horror and fear expressed in the novel are not fictional sentiments ground out to interest the reader; they come from the deepest part of me: yearning for the good father and fear of the evil father, the father who left me.

I found in the story The Days of Perky Pat *a vehicle that I could translate into a thematic basis for the novel I wanted to write. Now, you see, Perky Pat is the eternally beckoning fair one,* das ewige Weiblichkeit — *"the eternally feminine," as Goethe put it. Isolation generated the novel and yearning generated the story; so the novel is a mixture of the fear of being abandoned and the fantasy of the beautiful woman who waits for you — somewhere, but God only knows where; I have still to figure it out. But if you are sitting alone day after day at your typewriter, turning out one story after another and having no one to talk to, no one to be with, and yet pro forma having a wife and four daughters from whose house you have been expelled, banished to a little single-walled shack that is so cold in winter that, literally, the ink would freeze in my typewriter ribbon, well, you are going to write about iron slot-eyed faces and warm young women. And thus I did. And thus I still do.*

Reaction to THE THREE STIGMATA was mixed. In England some reviewers described it as blasphemy. Terry Carr, who was my agent at Scott Meredith at the time, told me later, "That novel is crazy," although subsequent to that he reversed his opinion. Some reviewers found it a profound novel. I only find it frightening. I was unable to proofread the galleys because the novel frightened me so. It is a dark journey into the mystical and the supernatural and the absolutely evil as I understood it at the time. Let us say, I would like Perky Pat to show up at my door, but I dread the possibility that, when I hear the knock, it will be Palmer Eldritch waiting outside and not Perky Pat. Actually, to be honest, neither has shown up in the seventeen or so years since I wrote the novel. I guess that is the story of life: what you most fear never happens, but what you most yearn for never happens either. This is the difference between life and fiction. I suppose it's a good trade-off. But I'm not sure. (1979)

STANDBY ("Top StandBy Job") 4/18/63. *Amazing*, Oct 1963.

WHAT'LL WE DO WITH RAGLAND PARK? ("No Ordinary Guy") 4/29/63. *Amazing*, Nov 1963.

OH, TO BE A BLOBEL! ("Well, See, There Were These Blobels…") 5/6/63. *Galaxy*, Feb 1964.

At the beginning of my writing career in the early Fifties, Galaxy *was my economic mainstay. Horace Gold at* Galaxy *liked my writing whereas John W Campbell, Jr. at* Astounding *considered my writing not only worthless but as he put it, "Nuts." By and large I liked reading* Galaxy *because it had the broadest range of ideas, venturing into the soft sciences such as sociology and psychology, at a time when Campbell (as he once wrote me!) considered psionics a necessary premise for science fiction. Also, Campbell said, the psionic character in the story had to be in charge of what was going on. So* Galaxy *provided a latitude which* Astounding *did not. However, I was to get into an awful quarrel with Horace Gold; he had the habit of changing your stories without telling you: adding scenes, adding characters, removing downbeat endings in favor of upbeat endings. Many writers resented this. I did more than resent this; despite the fact that*

Galaxy *was my main source of income I told Gold that I would not sell to him unless he stopped altering my stories — after which he bought nothing from me at all.*

It was not, then, until Fred Pohl became editor of Galaxy *that I began to appear there again.* Oh, To Be A Blobel! *is a story which Fred Pohl bought. In this story my enormous anti-war bias is evident, a bias which had, ironically, pleased Gold. I wasn't thinking of the Viet Nam War but war in general; in particular, how a war forces you to become like your enemy. Hitler had once said that the true victory of the Nazis would be to force its enemies, the United States in particular, to become like the Third Reich — i.e. a totalitarian society — in order to win. Hitler, then, expected to win even in losing. As I watched the American military-industrial complex grow after World War Two I kept remembering Hitler's analysis, and I kept thinking how right the son of a bitch was. We had beaten Germany, but both the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. were getting more and more like the Nazis with their huge police systems every day. Well, it seemed to me there was a little wry humor in this (but not much). Maybe I could write about it without getting too deep into polemics. But the issue presented in this story is real. Look what we had to become in Viet Nam just to lose, let alone to win; can you imagine what we'd have had to become to win? Hitler would have gotten a lot of laughs out of it, and the laughs would have been on us… and to a very great extent in fact were. And they were hollow and grim laughs, without humor of any kind.* (1979)

Here I nailed down the ultimate meaningless irony of war; the human turns into a Blobel, and the Blobel, his enemy, turns into a human, and there it all is, the futility, the black humor, the stupidity. And in the story they all wind up happy. (1976)

The Collected Stories of Philip K. Dick Vol.5

Philip K. Dick

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by Philip K. Dick

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Introduction

By Thomas M. Disch

The conventional wisdom has it that there are writers' writers and readers' writers. The latter are those happy few whose books, by some pheromonic chemistry the former can never quite duplicate in their own laboratories, appear year after year on the best seller lists. They may or (more usually) may not satisfy the up-market tastes of "literary" critics but their books sell. Writers' writers get great reviews, especially from their admiring colleagues, but their books don't attract readers, who can recognize, even at the distance of a review, the signs of a book by a writers' writer. The prose style comes in for high praise (a true readers' writer, by contrast, would not want to be accused of anything so elitist as "style"); the characters have "depth"; above all, such a book is "serious."

Many writers' writers aspire to the wider fame and higher advances of readers' writers, and occasionally a readers' writer will covet such laurels as royalties cannot buy. Henry James, the writers' writer *par excellence* wrote one of his drollest tales, *The Next Time*, about just such a pair of cross-purposed writers, and James's conclusion is entirely true to life. The literary writer does his best to write a blockbuster — and it wins him more laurels but no more readers. The successful hack does her damnedest to produce a Work of Art: the critics sneer, but it is her greatest commercial success.

Philip K. Dick was, in his time, both a writers' writer and a readers' writer; and neither; and another kind altogether — a science fiction writers' science fiction writer. The proof of the last contention is to be found blazoned on the covers of a multitude of his paperback books, where his colleagues have vied to lavish superlatives on him. John Brunner called him "the most consistently brilliant science fiction writer in the world." Norman Spinrad trumps this with "the greatest American novelist of the second half of the twentieth century." Ursula LeGuin anoints him as America's Borges,

which Harlan Ellison tops by hailing him as SF's "Pirandello, its Beckett and its Pinter." Brian Aldiss, Michael Bishop, myself — and many others — have all written encomia as extravagant, but all these praises had very little effect on the sales of the books they garlanded during the years those books were being written. Dick managed to survive as a full-time free-lance writer only by virtue of his immense productivity. Witness, the sheer expanse of these *COLLECTED STORIES,* and consider that most of his readers didn't consider Dick a short story writer at all but knew him chiefly by his novels.

It is significant, I think, that all the praise heaped on Dick was exclusively from other SF writers, not from the reputation makers of the Literary Establishment, for he was not like writers' writers outside genre fiction. It's not for his exquisite style he's applauded, or his depth of characterization. Dick's prose seldom soars, and often is lame as any Quasimodo. The characters in even some of his most memorable tales have all the "depth" of a 50s sitcom. (A more kindly way to think of it: he writes for the traditional complement of America's indigenous *commedia dell-arte*.) Even stories that one remembers as exceptions to this rule can prove, on rereading, to have more in common with Bradbury and van Vogt than with Borges and Pinter. Dick is content, most of the time, with a narrative surface as simple — even simple-minded — as a comic book. One need go no further than the first story in this book, *The Little Black Box,* for proof of this — and it was done in 1963, when Dick was at the height of his powers, writing such classic novels as *THE MAN IN THE HIGH CASTLE* and *MARTIAN TIME-SLIP.* Further, *Box* contains the embryo for another of his best novels of later years, *DO ANDROIDS DREAM OF ELECTRIC SHEEP?*

Why, then, such paeans? For any aficionado of SF the answer is self-evident: he had great ideas. Fans of genre writing have usually been able to tolerate sloppiness of execution for the sake of genuine novelty, since the bane of genre fiction has been the constant recycling of old plots and premises. And Dick's great ideas occupied a unique wave-band on the imaginative spectrum. Not for him the conquest of space. In Dick the colonization of the solar system simply results in new and more dismal suburbs being built. Not for him the Halloween mummeries of inventing

new breeds of Alien Monsters. Dick was always too conscious of the human face behind the Halloween mask to bother with elaborate masquerades. Dick's great ideas sprang up from the world around him, from the neighborhoods he lived in, the newspapers he read, the stores he shopped in, the ads on TV. His novels and stories taken all together comprise one of the most accurate and comprehensive pictures of American culture in the Populuxe and Viet Nam eras that exists in contemporary fiction — not because of his accuracy in the matter of inventorying the trivia of those times, but because he discovered metaphors that uncovered the *meaning* of the way we lived. He made of our common places worlds of wonder. What more can we ask of art?

Well, the answer is obvious: polish, execution, economy of means, and other esthetic niceties. Most SF writers, however, have been able to get along without table linen and crystal so long as the protein of a meaty metaphor was there on the plate. Indeed, Dick's esthetic failings could become virtues for his fellow SF writers, since it is so often possible for us to take the ball he fumbled and continue for a touchdown. Ursula LeGuin's *THE LATHE OF HEAVEN* is one of the best novels Dick ever wrote — except that he didn't. My own *334* would surely not have been the same book without the example of his own accounts of Future Drabness. The list of his conscious debtors is long, and of his unconscious debtors undoubtedly even longer.

Phil's own note at the back of this book to his story *The Pre-Persons* provides an illuminating example of the kind of reaction he could have on a fellow writer. In this case Joanna Russ allegedly offered to beat him up for his tale of a young boy's apprehension by the driver of a local "abortion truck," who operates like a dog catcher in rounding up Pre-Persons (children under 12 no longer wanted by their parents) and taking them into "abortion" centers to be gassed. It's an inspired piece of propaganda (Phil calls it "special pleading"), to which the only adequate response is surely not a threat to beat up the author but a story that dramatizes the same issue as forcefully and that does not shirk the interesting but trouble-making question: If abortion, why *not* infanticide? Dick's raising of this question in the current polarized climate of debate was a *coup de theatre* but scarcely the last word on the subject. One could easily extrapolate an entire novel

from the essential premise of *The Pre-Persons*, and it wouldn't necessarily be an anti-abortion tract. Dick's stories often flowered into novels when he re-considered his first good idea, and the reason he is a science fiction writers' science fiction writer is because his stories so often have had the same effect on his colleagues. Reading a story by Dick isn't like "contemplating" a finished work of art. Much more it's like becoming involved in a conversation. I'm glad to be a part, here, of that continuing conversation.

Thomas M. Disch

October, 1986

How does one fashion a book of resistance, a book of truth in an empire of falsehood, or a book of rectitude in an empire of vicious lies? How does one do this right in front of the enemy?

Not through the old-fashioned ways of writing while you're in the bathroom, but how does one do that in a truly future technological state? Is it possible for freedom and independence to arise in new ways under new conditions? That is, will new tyrannies abolish these protests? Or will there be new responses by the spirit that we can't anticipate?

— Philip K. Dick in an interview, 1974.

(from *ONLY APPARENTLY REAL)*

The Little Black Box

I

Bogart Crofts of the State Department said, “Miss Hiashi, we want to send you to Cuba to give religious instruction to the Chinese population there. It’s your Oriental background. It will help.”

With a faint moan, Joan Hiashi reflected that her Oriental background consisted of having been born in Los Angeles and having attended courses at UCSB, the University of Santa Barbara. But she was technically, from the standpoint of training, an Asian scholar, and she had properly listed this on her job-application form.

“Let’s consider the word *caritas,*” Crofts was saying. “In your estimation, what actually does it mean, as Jerome used it? Charity? Hardly. But then what? Friendliness? Love?”

Joan said, “My field is Zen Buddhism.”

“But everybody,” Crofts protested in dismay, “knows what caritas means in late Roman usage. The esteem of good people for one another; that’s what it means.” His gray, dignified eyebrows raised. “Do you want this job, Miss Hiashi? And if so, why?”

“I want to disseminate Zen Buddhist propaganda to the Communist Chinese in Cuba,” Joan said, “because —” She hesitated. The truth was simply that it meant a good salary for her, the first truly high-paying job she had ever held. From a career standpoint, it was a plum. “Aw, hell,” she said. “What is the nature of the One Way? I don’t have any answer.”

“It’s evident that your field has taught you a method of avoiding giving honest answers,” Crofts said sourly. “And being evasive. However —” He shrugged. “Possibly that only goes to prove that you’re well trained and the proper person for the job. In Cuba you’ll be running up against some rather worldly and sophisticated individuals, who in addition are quite well off even from the U.S. standpoint. I hope you can cope with them as well as you’ve coped with me.”

Joan said, “Thank you, Mr. Crofts.” She rose. “I’ll expect to hear from you, then.”

“I am impressed by you,” Crofts said, half to himself. “After all, you’re the young lady who first had the idea of feeding Zen Buddhist riddles to UCSB’s big computers.”

“I was the first to *do* it,” Joan corrected. “But the idea came from a friend of mine, Ray Meritan. The gray-green jazz harpist.”

“Jazz and Zen Buddhism,” Crofts said. “State may be able to make use of you in Cuba.”

To Ray Meritan she said, “I have to get out of Los Angeles, Ray. I really can’t stand the way we’re living here.” She walked to the window of his apartment and looked out at the monorail gleaming far off. The silver car made its way at enormous speed, and Joan hurriedly looked away.

If we only could suffer, she thought. That’s what we lack, any real experience of suffering, because we can escape anything. Even this.

“But you are getting out,” Ray said. “You’re going to Cuba and convert wealthy merchants and bankers into becoming ascetics. And it’s a genuine Zen paradox; you’ll be paid for it.” He chuckled. “Fed into a computer, a thought like that would do harm. Anyhow, you won’t have to sit in the Crystal Hall every night listening to me play — if that’s what you’re anxious to get away from.”

“No,” Joan said, “I expect to keep on listening to you on TV. I may even be able to use your music in my teaching.” From a rosewood chest in the far corner of the room she lifted out a .32 pistol. It had belonged to Ray Meritan’s second wife, Edna, who had used it to kill herself, the previous February, late one rainy afternoon. “May I take this along?” she asked.

“For sentiment?” Ray said. “Because she did it on your account?”

“Edna did nothing on my account. Edna liked me. I’m not taking any responsibility for your wife’s suicide, even though she did find out about us — seeing each other, so to speak.”

Ray said meditatively, “And you’re the girl always telling people to accept blame and not to project it out on the world. What do you call your principle, dear? Ah.” He grinned. “The Anti-paranoia Prinzip. Doctor Joan Hiashi’s cure for mental illness; absorb all blame, take it all upon yourself.” He glanced up at her and said acutely, “I’m surprised you’re not a follower of Wilbur Mercer.”

“That clown,” Joan said.

“But that’s part of his appeal. Here, I’ll show you.” Ray switched on the TV set across the room from them, the legless black Oriental-style set with its ornamentation of Sung dynasty dragons.

“Odd you would know when Mercer is on,” Joan said.

Ray, shrugging murmured, “I’m interested. A new religion, replacing Zen Buddhism, sweeping out of the Middle West to engulf California. You ought to pay attention, too, since you claim religion as your profession. You’re getting a job because of it. Religion is paying your bills, my dear girl, so don’t knock it.”

The TV had come on, and there was Wilbur Mercer.

“Why isn’t he saying anything?” Joan said.

“Why, Mercer has taken a vow this week. Complete silence.” Ray lit a cigarette. “State ought to be sending me, not you. You’re a fake.”

“At least I’m not a clown,” Joan said, “or a follower of a clown.”

Ray reminded her softly, “There’s a Zen saying, ‘The Buddha is a piece of toilet paper.’ And another. ‘The Buddha often —’ “

“Be still,” she said sharply. “I want to watch Mercer.”

“You want to watch,” Ray’s voice was heavy with irony. “Is that what you want, for God’s sake? No one *watches* Mercer; that’s the whole point.” Tossing his cigarette into the fireplace, he strode to the TV set; there, before it, Joan saw a metal box with two handles, attached by a lead of twin-cable wire to the TV set. Ray seized the two handles, and at once a grimace of pain shot across his face.

“What is it?” she asked, in anxiety.

“N-nothing.” Ray continued to grip the handles. On the screen, Wilbur Mercer walked slowly over the barren, jagged surface of a desolate hillside, his face lifted, an expression of serenity — or vacuity — on his thin, middle-aged features. Gasping, Ray released the handles. “I could only hold them for forty-five seconds this time.” To Joan, he explained, “This is the empathy box, my dear. I can’t tell you how I got it — to be truthful I don’t really know. *They* brought it by, the organization that distributes it — Wilcer, Incorporated. But I can tell you that when you take hold of these handles you’re no longer watching Wilbur Mercer. You’re actually participating in his apotheosis. Why, you’re feeling what he feels.”

Joan said, “It looks like it hurts.”

Quietly, Ray Meritan said, “Yes. Because Wilbur Mercer is being killed. He’s walking to the place where he’s going to die.”

In horror, Joan moved away from the box.

“You said that was what we needed,” Ray said. “Remember, I’m a rather adequate telepath; I don’t have to bestir myself very much to read your thoughts. ‘If only we could suffer.’ That’s what you were thinking, just a little while ago. Well, here’s your chance, Joan.”

“It’s — morbid!”

“Was your thought morbid?”

“Yes!” she said.

Ray Meritan said, “Twenty million people are followers of Wilbur Mercer now. All over the world. And they’re suffering with him, as he walks along toward Pueblo, Colorado. At least that’s where they’re *told* he’s going. Personally I have my doubts. Anyhow, Mercerism is now what Zen Buddhism was once; you’re going to Cuba to teach the wealthy Chinese bankers a form of asceticism that’s already obsolete, already seen its day.”

Silently, Joan turned away from him and watched Mercer walking.

“You know I’m right,” Ray said. “I can pick up your emotions. You may not be aware of them, but they’re there.”

On the screen, a rock was thrown at Mercer. It struck him on the shoulder.

Everyone who’s holding onto his empathy box, Joan realized, felt that along with Mercer.

Ray nodded. “You’re right.”

“And — what about when he’s actually killed?” She shuddered.

“We’ll see what happens then,” Ray said quietly. “We don’t know.”

II

To Bogart Crofts, Secretary of State Douglas Herrick said, “I think you’re wrong, Boge. The girl may be Meritan’s mistress but that doesn’t mean she knows.”

“We’ll wait for Mr. Lee to tell us,” Crofts said irritably. “When she gets to Havana he’ll be waiting to meet her.”

“Mr. Lee can’t scan Meritan direct?”

“One telepath scan another?” Bogart Crofts smiled at the thought. It conjured up a nonsensical situation: Mr. Lee reading Meritan’s mind, and Meritan, also being a telepath, would read Mr. Lee’s mind and discover that Mr. Lee was reading his mind, and Lee, reading Meritan’s mind, would discover that Meritan knew — and so forth. Endless regression, winding up with a fusion of minds, within which Meritan carefully guarded his thoughts so that he did not think about Wilbur Mercer.

“It’s the similarity of names that convinces me,” Herrick said. “Meritan, Mercer. The first three letters — ?”

Crofts said, “Ray Meritan is not Wilbur Mercer. I’ll tell you how we know. Over at CIA, we made an Ampex video tape from Mercer’s telecast, had it enlarged and analyzed. Mercer was shown against the usual dismal background of cactus plants and sand and rock… you know.”

“Yes,” Herrick said, nodding. “The Wilderness, as they call it.”

“In the enlargement something showed up in the sky. It was studied. It’s not Luna. It’s a moon, but too small to be Luna. Mercer is not on Earth. I would guess that he is not a terrestrial at all.”

Bending down, Crofts picked up a small metal box, carefully avoiding the two handles. “And these were not designed and built on Earth. The entire Mercer Movement is null-T all the way, and that’s the fact we’ve got to contend with.”

Herrick said, “If Mercer is not a Terran, then he may have suffered and even died before, on other planets.”

“Oh, yes,” Crofts said. “Mercer — or whatever his or its real name is — may be highly experienced in this. But we still don’t know what we want to know.” And that of course was, What happens to those people holding onto the handles of their empathy boxes?

Crofts seated himself at his desk and scrutinized the box resting directly before him, with its two inviting handles. He had never touched them, and he never intended to. But —

“How soon will Mercer die?” Herrick asked.

“They’re expecting it some time late next week.”

“And Mr. Lee will have gotten something from the girl’s mind by then, you think? Some clue as to where Mercer really is?”

“I hope so,” Crofts said, still seated at the empathy box but still not touching it. It must be a strange experience, he thought, to place your hands on two ordinary-looking metal handles and find, all at once, that you’re no longer yourself; you’re another man entirely, in another place, laboring up a long, dreary inclined plain toward certain extinction. At least, so they say. But hearing about it… what does that actually convey? Suppose I tried it for myself.

The sense of absolute pain… that was what appalled him, held him back.

It was unbelievable that people could deliberately seek it out, rather than avoiding it. Gripping the handles of the empathy box was certainly not the act of a person seeking escape. It was not the avoidance of something but the seeking of something. And not the pain as such; Crofts knew better than to suppose that the Mercerites were simple masochists who desired discomfort. It was, he knew, the meaning of the pain which attracted Mercer's followers.

The followers were suffering from something.

Aloud, he said to his superior, "They want to suffer as a means of denying their private, personal existences. It's a communion in which they all suffer and experience Mercer's ordeal together." Like the Last Supper, he thought. That's the real key: the communion, the participation that is behind all religion. Or ought to be. Religion binds men together in a sharing, corporate body, and leaves everyone else on the outside.

Herrick said, "But primarily it's a political movement, or must be treated as such."

"From our standpoint," Crofts agreed. "Not theirs."

The intercom on the desk buzzed and his secretary said, "Sir, Mr. John Lee is here."

"Tell him to come in."

The tall, slender young Chinese entered, smiling, his hand out. He wore an old-fashioned single-breasted suit and pointed black shoes. As they shook hands, Mr. Lee said, "She has not left for Havana, has she?"

"No," Crofts said.

"Is she pretty?" Mr. Lee said.

“Yes,” Crofts said, with a smile at Herrick. “But — difficult. The snappish kind of woman. Emancipated, if you follow me.”

“Oh, the suffragette type,” Mr. Lee said, smiling. “I detest that type of female. It will be hard going, Mr. Crofts.”

“Remember,” Crofts said, “your job is simply to be converted. All you have to do is listen to her propaganda about Zen Buddhism, learn to ask a few questions such as, ‘Is this stick the Buddha?’ and expect a few inexplicable blows on the head — a Zen practice, I understand, supposed to instill sense.”

With a broad grin, Mr. Lee said, “Or to instill nonsense. You see, I am prepared. Sense, nonsense; in Zen it’s the same thing.” He became sober, now. “Of course, I myself am a Communist,” he said. “The only reason I’m doing this is because the Party at Havana has taken the official stand that Mercerism is dangerous and must be wiped out.” He looked gloomy. “I must say, these Mercerites are fanatics.”

“True,” Crofts agreed. “And we must work for their extinction.” He pointed to the empathy box. “Have you ever —?”

“Yes,” Mr. Lee said. “It’s a form of punishment. Self-imposed, no doubt for reasons of guilt. Leisure gleans such emotions from people if it is properly utilized; otherwise not.”

Crofts thought, This man has no understanding of the issues at all. He’s a simple materialist. Typical of a person born in a Communist family, raised in a Communist society. Everything is either black or white.

“You’re mistaken,” Mr. Lee said; he had picked up Crofts’ thought.

Flushing, Crofts said, “Sorry, I forgot. No offense.”

“I see in your mind,” Mr. Lee said, “that you believe Wilbur Mercer, as he calls himself, may be non-T. Do you know the Party’s position on this question? It was debated just a few days ago. The Party takes the stand that there are no non-T races in the solar system, that to believe remnants of once-superior races still exist is a form of morbid mysticism.”

Crofts sighed. “Deciding an empirical issue by vote — deciding it on a strictly political basis. I can’t understand that.”

At that point, Secretary Herrick spoke up, soothing both men. “Please, let’s not become sidetracked by theoretical issues on which we don’t all agree. Let’s stick to basics - the Mercerite Party and its rapid growth all over the planet.”

Mr. Lee said, “You are right, of course.”

III

At the Havana airfield Joan Hiashi looked around her as the other passengers walked rapidly from the ship to the entrance of the number twenty concourse.

Relatives and friends had surged cautiously out onto the field, as they always did, in defiance of field rulings. She saw among them a tall, lean young Chinese man with a smile of greeting on his face.

Walking toward him she called, “Mr. Lee?”

“Yes.” He hurried toward her. “It’s dinner time. Would you care to eat? I’ll take you to the Hang Far Lo restaurant. They have pressed duck and bird’s nest soup, all Canton-style… very sweet but good once in a long while.”

Soon they were at the restaurant, in a red-leather and imitation teak booth. Cubans and Chinese chattered on all sides of them; the air smelled of frying pork and cigar smoke.

“You are President of the Havana Institute for Asian Studies?” she asked, just to be certain there had been no slip-ups.

“Correct. It is frowned on by the Cuban Communist Party because of the religious aspect. But many of the Chinese here on the island attend lectures or are on our mailing list. And as you know we’ve had many distinguished scholars from Europe and Southern Asia come and address us… By the way. There is a Zen parable which I do not understand. The monk who cut the kitten in half — I have studied it and thought about it, but I do not see how the Buddha could be present when cruelty was done to an animal.” He hastened to add, “I’m not disputing with you. I am merely seeking information.”

Joan said, “Of all the Zen parables that has caused the most difficulty. The question to ask is, Where is the kitten now?”

“That recalls the opening of the *Bhagavad-Gita*,” Mr. Lee said, with a quick nod. “I recall Arjura saying,

The bow Gandiva slips from my hand…

Omens of evil!

What can we hope from this killing of kinsmen?

“Correct,” Joan said, “And of course you remember Krishna’s answer. It is the most profound statement in all pre-Buddhistic religion of the issue of death and of action.”

The waiter came for their order. He was a Cuban, in khaki and a beret.

“Try the fried won ton,” Mr. Lee advised. “And the chow yuk, and of course the egg roll. You have egg roll today?” he asked the waiter.

“Si, Senor Lee.” The waiter picked at his teeth with a toothpick.

Mr. Lee ordered for both of them, and the waiter departed.

“You know,” Joan said, “when you’ve been around a telepath as much as I have, you become conscious of intensive scanning going on… I could always tell when Ray was trying to dig at something in me. You’re a telepath. And you’re very intensively scanning me right now.”

Smiling, Mr. Lee said, “I wish I was, Miss Hiashi.”

“I have nothing to hide,” Joan said. “But I wonder why you are so interested in what I’m thinking. You know I’m an employee of the United

States Department of State; there's nothing secret about that. Are you afraid I've come to Cuba as a spy? To study military installations? Is it something like that?" She felt depressed. "This is not a good beginning," she said. "You haven't been honest with me."

"You are a very attractive woman, Miss Hiashi," Mr. Lee said, losing none of his poise. "I was merely curious to see — shall I be blunt? Your attitude toward sex."

"You're lying," Joan said quietly.

Now the bland smile departed; he stared at her.

"Bird's nest soup, senor." The waiter had returned; he set the hot steaming bowl in the center of the table. "Tea." He laid out a teapot and two small white handleless cups. "Senorita, you want chopsticks?"

"No," she said absently.

From outside the booth came a cry of anguish. Both Joan and Mr. Lee leaped up. Mr. Lee pulled the curtain aside; the waiter was staring, too, and laughing.

At a table in the opposite corner of the restaurant sat an elderly Cuban gentleman with his hands gripping the handles of an empathy box.

"Here, too," Joan said.

"They are pests," Mr. Lee said. "Disturbing our meal."

The waiter said, "Loco." He shook his head, still chuckling.

"Yes," Joan said. "Mr. Lee, I will continue here, trying to do my job, despite what's occurred between us. I don't know why they deliberately sent a telepath to meet me — possibly it's Communist paranoid suspicions

of outsiders — but in any case I have a job to do here and I mean to do it. So shall we discuss the dismembered kitten?"

"At meal time?" Mr. Lee said faintly.

"You brought it up," Joan said, and proceeded, despite the expression of acute misery on Mr. Lee's face as he sat spooning up his bird's nest soup.

At the Los Angeles studio of television station KKHF, Ray Meritan sat at his harp, waiting for his cue. *How High the Moon*, he had decided, would be his first number. He yawned, kept his eye on the control booth.

Beside him, at the blackboard, jazz commentator Glen Goldstream polished his rimless glasses with a fine linen handkerchief and said, "I think I'll tie in with Gustav Mahler tonight."

"Who the hell is he?"

"A great late nineteenth century composer. Very romantic. Wrote long peculiar symphonies and folk-type songs. I'm thinking, however, of the rhythmic patterns in *The Drunkard in Springtime* from *Song of the Earth.* You've never heard it?"

"Nope," Meritan said restlessly.

"Very gray-green."

Ray Meritan did not feel very gray-green tonight. His head still ached from the rock thrown at Wilbur Mercer. Meritan had tried to let go of the empathy box when he saw the rock coming, but he had not been quick enough. It had struck Mercer on the right temple, drawing blood.

"I've run into three Mercerites this evening," Glen said. "And all of them looked terrible. What happened to Mercer today?"

“How would I know?”

“You’re carrying yourself the way they did today. It’s your head, isn’t it? I know you well enough, Ray. You’d be mixed up in anything new and odd — what do I care if you’re a Mercerite? I just thought maybe you’d like a pain pill.”

Brusquely, Ray Meritan said, “That would defeat the entire idea wouldn’t it? A pain pill. Here, Mr. Mercer, as you go up the hillside, how about a shot of morphine? You won’t feel a thing.” He rippled a few cadences on his harp, releasing his emotions.

“You’re on,” the producer said from the control room.

Their theme, *That’s a Plenty,* swelled from the tape deck in the control room, and the number two camera facing Goldstream lit up its red light. Arms folded, Goldstream said, “Good evening, ladies and gentlemen. What is jazz?”

That’s what I say, Meritan thought. What is jazz? What is life? He rubbed his splintered, pain-racked forehead and wondered how he could endure the next week. Wilbur Mercer was getting close to it now. Each day it would become worse…

“And after a brief pause for an important message,” Goldstream was saying, “we’ll be back to tell you more about the world of gray-green men and women, those peculiar people, and the world of the artistry of the one and only Ray Meritan.”

The tape of the commercial appeared on the TV monitor facing Meritan.

Meritan said to Goldstream, “I’ll take the pain pill.”

A yellow, flat, notched tablet was held out to him. “Paracodein,” Goldstream said. “Highly illegal, but effective. An addictive drug… I’m surprised you, of all people, don’t carry some.”

“I used to,” Ray said, as he got a dixie cup of water and swallowed the pill.

“And now you’re on Mercerism.”

“Now I’m —” He glanced at Goldstream; they had known each other, in their professional capacities, for years. “I’m not a Mercerite,” he said, “so forget it, Glen. It’s just coincidence I got a headache the night Mercer was hit on the temple by a sharp rock thrown by some moronic sadist who ought to be the one dragging his way up that hillside.” He scowled at Goldstream.

“I understand,” Goldstream said, “that the U.S. Department of Mental Health is on the verge of asking the Justice Department to pick up the Mercerites.”

Suddenly he swung to face camera two. A faint smile touched his face and he said smoothly, “Gray-green began about four years ago, in Pinole, California, at the now justly-famous Double Shot Club where Ray Meritan played, back in 1993 and ‘4. Tonight, Ray will let us hear one of his best known and liked numbers, *Once in Love with Amy.”* He swung in Meritan’s direction. “Ray… Meritan!”

Plunk-plunk, the harp went as Ray Meritan’s fingers riffled the strings.

An object lesson, he thought as he played. That’s what the FBI would make me into for the teenagers, to show them what not to grow up to be. First on Paracodein, now on Mercer. Beware, kids!

Off camera, Glen Goldstream held up a sign he had scribbled.

IS MERCER A NONTERRESTRIAL?

Underneath this, Goldstream wrote with a marking pencil:

IT'S *THAT* THEY WANT TO KNOW.

Invasion from outside there somewhere, Meritan thought to himself as he played. That's what they're afraid of. Fear of the unknown, like tiny children. That's our ruling circles: tiny, fear-ridden children playing ritualistic games with super-powerful toys.

A thought came to him from one of the network officials in the control room. *Mercer has been injured.*

At once, Ray Meritan turned his attention that way, scanned as hard as he could. His fingers strummed the harp reflexively.

Government outlawing so-called empathy boxes.

He thought immediately of his own empathy box, before his TV set in the living room of his apartment.

Organization which distributes and sells the empathy boxes declared illegal, and FBI making arrests in several major cities. Other countries expected to follow.

How badly injured? he wondered. Dying?

And — what about the Mercerites who had been holding onto the handles of their empathy boxes at that moment? How were they, now? Receiving medical attention?

Should we air the news now? the network official was thinking. *Or wait until the commercial?*

Ray Meritan ceased playing his harp and said clearly into the boom microphone, “Wilbur Mercer has been injured. This is what we’ve expected but it’s still a major tragedy. Mercer is a saint.”

Wide-eyed, Glen Goldstream gawked at him.

“I believe in Mercer,” Ray Meritan said, and all across the United States his television audience heard his confession of faith. “I believe his suffering and injury and death have meaning for each of us.”

It was done; he had gone on record. And it hadn’t even taken much courage.

“Pray for Wilbur Mercer,” he said and resumed playing his gray-green style of harp.

You fool, Glen Goldstream was thinking. Giving yourself away! You’ll be in jail within a week. Your career is ruined!

Plunk-plunk, Ray played on his harp, and smiled humorlessly at Glen.

IV

Mr. Lee said, “Do you know the story of the Zen monk, who was playing hide and go seek with the children? Was it Basho who tells this? The monk hid in an outhouse and the children did not think of looking there, and so they forgot him. He was a very simple man. Next day —”

“I admit that Zen is a form of stupidity,” Joan Hiashi said. “It extols the virtues of being simple and gullible. And remember, the original meaning of ‘gullible’ is one who is easily gulled, easily cheated.” She sipped a little of her tea and found it now cold.

“Then you are a true practitioner of Zen,” Mr. Lee said. “Because you have been gulled.” He reached inside his coat and brought out a pistol, which he pointed at Joan. “You’re under arrest.”

“By the Cuban Government?” she managed to say.

“By the United States Government,” Mr. Lee said. “I have read your mind and I learn that you know that Ray Meritan is a prominent Mercerite and you yourself are attracted to Mercerism.”

“But I’m not!”

“Unconsciously you are attracted. You are about to switch over. I can pick up those thoughts, even if you deny them to yourself. We are going back to the United States, you and I, and there we will find Mr. Ray Meritan and he will lead us to Wilbur Mercer; it is as simple as that.”

“And this is why I was sent to Cuba?”

“I am a member of the Central Committee of the Cuban Communist Party,” Mr. Lee said. “And the sole telepath on that committee. We have

voted to work in cooperation with the United States Department of State during this current Mercer crisis. Our plane, Miss Hiashi, leaves for Washington, D.C. in half an hour; let us get down to the airport at once."

Joan Hiashi looked helplessly about the restaurant. Other people eating, the waiters… nobody paid attention. She rose to her feet as a waiter passed with a heavily-loaded tray. "This man," she said, pointing to Mr. Lee, "is kidnapping me. Help me, please."

The waiter glanced at Mr. Lee, saw who it was, smiled at Joan and shrugged. "Mr. Lee, he is an important man," the waiter said, and went on with his tray.

"What he says is true," Mr. Lee said to her.

Joan ran from the booth and across the restaurant. "Help me," she said to the elderly Cuban Mercerite who sat with his empathy box before him. "I'm a Mercerite. They're arresting me."

The lined old face lifted; the man scrutinized her.

"Help me," she said.

"Praise Mercer," the old man said.

You can't help me, she realized. She turned back to Mr. Lee, who had followed after her, still holding the pistol pointed at her. "This old man is not going to do a thing," Mr. Lee said. "Not even get to his feet."

She sagged. "All right. I know."

The television set in the corner suddenly ceased its yammering of daytime trash; the image of a woman's face and bottle of cleanser abruptly disappeared and there was only blackness. Then, in Spanish, a news announcer began to speak.

“Hurt,” Mr. Lee said, listening. “But Mercer is not dead. How do you feel, Miss Hiashi, as a Mercerite? Does this affect you? Oh, but that’s right. One must take hold of the handles first, for it to reach you. It must be a voluntary act.”

Joan picked up the elderly Cuban’s empathy box, held it for a moment, and then seized the handles. Mr. Lee stared at her in surprise; he moved toward her, reaching for the box…

It was not pain that she felt. Is this how it is? she wondered as she saw around her, the restaurant dim and faded. Maybe Wilbur Mercer is unconscious; that must be it. I’m escaping from you, she thought to Mr. Lee. You can’t — or at least you won’t — follow me where I’ve gone: into the tomb world of Wilbur Mercer, who is dying somewhere on a barren plain, surrounded by his enemies. Now I’m with him. And it is an escape from something worse. From you. And you’re never going to be able to get me back.

She saw, around her, a desolate expanse. The air smelled of harsh blossoms; this was the desert, and there was no rain.

A man stood before her, a sorrowful light in his gray, pain-drenched eyes. “I am your friend,” he said, “but you must go on as if I did not exist. Can you understand that?” He spread empty hands.

“No,” she said, “I can’t understand that.”

“How can I save you,” the man said, “if I can’t save myself?” He smiled: “Don’t you see? *There is no salvation*.”

“Then what’s it all for?” she asked.

“To show you,” Wilbur Mercer said, “that you aren’t alone. I am here with you and always will be. Go back and face them. And tell them that.”

She released the handles.

Mr. Lee, holding his gun to her, said, “Well?”

“Let’s go,” she said. “Back to the United States. Turn me over to the FBI. It doesn’t matter.”

“What did you see?” Mr. Lee said, with curiosity.

“I won’t tell you.”

“But I can learn it anyhow. From your mind.” He was probing, now, listening with his head cocked on one side. The corners of his mouth turned down as if he was pouting.

“I don’t call that much,” he said. “Mercer looks you in the face and says he can’t do anything for you — is this the man you’d lay down your life for, you and the others? You’re ill.”

“In the society of the insane,” Joan said, “the sick are well.”

“What nonsense!” Mr. Lee said.

To Bogart Crofts Mr. Lee said, “It was interesting. She became a Mercerite directly in front of me. The latency transforming itself into actuality… it proved I was correct in what I previously read in her mind.”

“We’ll have Meritan picked up any time now,” Crofts said to his superior, Secretary Herrick. “He left the television studio in Los Angeles, where he got news of Mercer’s severe injury. After that, no one seems to know what he did. He did *not* return to his apartment. The local police picked up his empathy box, and he was beyond a doubt not on the premises.”

“Where is Joan Hiashi?” Crofts asked.

“Being held now in New York,” Mr. Lee said.

“On what charge?” Crofts asked Secretary Herrick.

“Political agitation inimical to the safety of the United States.”

Smiling, Mr. Lee said, “And arrested by a Communist official in Cuba. It is a Zen paradox which no doubt fails to delight Miss Hiashi.”

Meanwhile, Bogart Crofts reflected, empathy boxes were being collected in huge quantities. Soon their destruction would begin. Within forty-eight hours most of the empathy boxes in the United States would no longer exist, including the one here in his office.

It still rested on his desk, untouched. It was he who originally had asked that it be brought in, and in all this time he had kept his hands off it, had never yielded. Now he walked over to it.

“What would happen,” he asked Mr. Lee, “if I took hold of these two handles? There’s no television set here. I have no idea what Wilbur Mercer is doing right now; in fact for all that I know, now he’s finally dead.”

Mr. Lee said, “If you grip the handles, sir, you will enter a — I hesitate to use the word but it seems to apply. A mystical communion. With Mr. Mercer, wherever he is; you will share his suffering, as you know, but that is not all. You will also participate in his —” Mr. Lee reflected. ” ‘World-view’ is not the correct term. Ideology? No.”

Secretary Herrick suggested, “What about *trance-state*?”

“Perhaps that is it,” Mr. Lee said, frowning. “No, that is not it either. No word will do, and that is the entire point. It cannot be described — it must be experienced.”

“I’ll try,” Crofts decided.

“No,” Mr. Lee said. “Not if you are following my advice. I would warn you away from it. I saw Miss Hiashi do it, and I saw the change in her. Would you have tried Paracodein when it was popular with rootless cosmopolite masses?” He sounded angry.

“I have tried Paracodein,” Crofts said. “It did absolutely nothing for me.”

“What do you want done, Boge?” Secretary Herrick asked him.

Shrugging, Bogart Crofts said, “I mean I could see no reason for anyone liking it, wanting to become addicted to it.” And at last he took hold of the two handles of the empathy box.

V

Walking slowly in the rain, Ray Meritan said to himself, They got my empathy box and if I go back to the apartment they'll get me.

His telepathic talent had saved him. As he entered the building he had picked up the thoughts of the gang of city police.

It was now past midnight. The trouble is I'm too well-known, he realized, from my damned TV show. No matter where I go I'll be recognized.

At least anywhere on Earth.

Where is Wilbur Mercer? he asked himself. In this solar system or somewhere beyond it, under a different sun entirely? Maybe we'll never know. Or at least *I'll* never know.

But did it matter? Wilbur Mercer was somewhere; that was all that was important. And there was always a way to reach him. The empathy box was always there — or at least had been, until the police raids. And Meritan had a feeling that the distribution company which had supplied the empathy boxes, and which led a shadowy existence anyhow, would find a way around the police. If he was right about them —

Ahead in the rainy darkness he saw the red lights of a bar. He turned and entered it.

To the bartender he said, "Look, do you have an empathy box? I'll pay you one hundred dollars for the use of it."

The bartender, a big burly man with hairy arms, said, "Naw, I don't have nuthin like that. Go on."

The people at the bar watched, and one of them said, “Those are illegal now.”

“Hey, it’s Ray Meritan,” another said. “The jazz man.”

Another man said lazily, “Play some gray-green jazz for us, jazz man.” He sipped at his mug of beer.

Meritan started out of the bar.

“Wait,” the bartender said. “Hold on, buddy. Go to this address.” He wrote on a match folder, then held it out to Meritan.

“How much do I owe you?” Meritan said.

“Oh, five dollars ought to do it.”

Meritan paid and left the bar, the match folder in his pocket. It’s probably the address of the local police station, he said to himself. But I’ll give it a try anyhow.

If I could get to an empathy box one more time —

The address which the bartender had given him was an old, decaying wooden building in downtown Los Angeles. He rapped on the door and stood waiting.

The door opened. A middle-aged heavy woman in bathrobe and furry slippers peeped out at him. “I’m not the police,” he said. “I’m a Mercerite. Can I use your empathy box?”

The door gradually opened; the woman scrutinized him and evidently believed him, although she said nothing.

“Sorry to bother you so late,” he apologized.

“What happened to you, mister?” the woman said. “You look bad.”

“It’s Wilbur Mercer,” Ray said. “He’s hurt.”

“Turn it on,” the woman said, leading him with shuffling into a dark, cold parlor where a parrot slept in a huge, bent, brass-wire cage. There, on an old-fashioned radio cabinet, he saw the empathy box. He felt relief creep over him at the sight of it.

“Don’t be shy,” the woman said.

“Thanks,” he said, and took hold of the handles.

A voice said in his ear, “We’ll use the girl. She’ll lead us to Meritan. I was right to hire her in the first place.”

Ray Meritan did not recognize the voice. It was not that of Wilbur Mercer. But even so, bewildered, he held tightly onto the handles, listening; he remained frozen there, hands extended, clutching.

“The non-T force has appealed to the most credulous segment of our community, but this segment — I firmly believe — is being manipulated by a cynical minority of opportunists at the top, such as Meritan. They’re cashing in on this Wilbur Mercer craze for their own pocketbooks.” The voice, self-assured, droned on.

Ray Meritan felt fear as he heard it. For this was someone on the other side, he realized. Somehow he had gotten into empathic contact with him, and not with Wilbur Mercer.

Or had Mercer done this deliberately, arranged this? He listened on, and now he heard:

"… have to get the Hiashi girl out of New York and back here, where we can quiz her further." The voice added, "As I told Herrick…"

Herrick, the Secretary of State. This was someone in the State Department thinking, Meritan realized, thinking about Joan. Perhaps this was the official at State who had hired her.

Then she wasn't in Cuba. She was in New York. What had gone wrong? The whole implication was that State had merely made use of Joan to get at him.

He released the handles and the voice faded from his presence.

"Did you find him?" the middle-aged woman asked.

"Y-yes," Meritan said, disconcerted, trying to orient himself in the unfamiliar room.

"How is he? Is he well?"

"I — don't know right now," Meritan answered, truthfully. He thought, I must go to New York. And try to help Joan. She's in this because of me; I have no choice. Even if they catch me because of it… how can I desert her?

Bogart Crofts said, "I didn't get Mercer."

He walked away from the empathy box, then turned to glare at it, balefully. "I got Meritan. But I don't know where he is. At the moment I took hold of the handles of this box, Meritan took hold somewhere else. We were connected and now he knows everything I know. And we know everything he knows, which isn't much." Dazed he turned to Secretary Herrick. "He doesn't know any more about Wilbur Mercer than we do; he was trying to reach him. He definitely is *not* Mercer." Crofts was silent then.

“There’s more,” Herrick said, turning to Mr. Lee. “What else did he get from Meritan, Mr. Lee?”

“Meritan is coming to New York to try to find Joan Hiashi,” Mr. Lee said, obligingly reading Crofts’ mind. “He got that from Mr. Meritan during the moment their minds were fused.”

“We’ll prepare to receive Mr. Meritan,” Secretary Herrick said, with a grimace.

“Did I experience what you telepaths engage in all the time?” Crofts asked Mr. Lee.

“Only when one of us comes close to another telepath,” Mr. Lee said. “It can be unpleasant. We avoid it, because if the two minds are thoroughly dissimilar and hence clash, it is psychologically harmful. I would assume you and Mr. Meritan clashed.”

Crofts said, “Listen, how can we continue with this? I know now that Meritan is innocent. He doesn’t know a damn thing about Mercer or the organization that distributes these boxes except its name.”

There was momentary silence.

“But he is one of the few celebrities who has joined the Mercerites,” Secretary Herrick pointed out. He handed a teletype dispatch to Crofts. “And he has done it openly. If you’ll take the trouble to read this —”

“I know he affirmed his loyalty to Mercer on this evening’s TV program,” Crofts said, trembling.

“When you’re dealing with a non-T force originating from another solar system entirely,” Secretary Herrick said, “you must move with care. We will still try to take Meritan, and definitely through Miss Hiashi. We’ll

release her from jail and have her followed. When Meritan makes contact with her —”

To Crofts, Mr. Lee said, “Don’t say what you intend, Mr. Crofts. It will permanently damage your career.”

Crofts said, “Herrick, this is wrong. Meritan is innocent and so is Joan Hiashi. If you try to trap Meritan I’ll resign from State.”

“Write out your resignation and hand it to me,” Secretary Herrick said. His face was dark.

“This is unfortunate,” Mr. Lee said. “I would guess that your contact with Mr. Meritan warped your judgment, Mr. Crofts. He has influenced you malignly; shake it off, for the sake of your long career and country, not to mention your family.”

“What we’re doing is wrong,” Crofts repeated.

Secretly Herrick stared at him angrily. “No wonder those empathy boxes have done harm! Now I’ve seen it with my own eyes. I wouldn’t turn back on any condition now.”

He picked up the empathy box which Crofts had used. Lifting it high he dropped it to the floor. The box cracked open and then settled in a heap of irregular surfaces. “Don’t consider that a childish act,” he said. “I want any contact between us and Meritan broken. It can only be harmful.”

“If we capture him,” Crofts said, “he may continue to exert influence over us.” He amended his statement: “Or rather, over me.”

“Be that as it may, I intend to continue,” Secretary Herrick said. “And please present your resignation. Mr. Crofts, I intend to act on that matter as well.” He looked grim and determined.

Mr. Lee said, “Secretary, I can read Mr. Crofts’ mind and I see that he is stunned at this moment. He is the innocent victim of a situation, arranged perhaps by Wilbur Mercer to spread confusion among us. And if you accept Mr. Crofts’ resignation, Mercer will have succeeded.”

“It doesn’t matter whether he accepts it or not,” Crofts said. “Because in any case I’m resigning.”

Sighing, Mr. Lee said, “The empathy box made you suddenly into an involuntary telepath and it was just too much.” He patted Mr. Crofts on the shoulder. “Telepathic power and empathy are two versions of the same thing. It should be called ‘telepathic box.’ Amazing, those non-T individuals; they can build what we can only evolve.”

“Since you can read my mind,” Crofts said to him, “you know what I’m planning to do. I have no doubt you’ll tell Secretary Herrick.”

Grinning blandly, Mr. Lee said, “The Secretary and I are cooperating in the interest of world peace. We both have our instructions.” To Herrick he said, “This man is so upset that he now actually considers switching over. Joining the Mercerites before all the boxes are destroyed. He *liked* being an involuntary telepath.”

“If you switch,” Herrick said, “you’ll be arrested. I promise it.” Crofts said nothing.

“He has not changed his mind,” Mr. Lee said urbanely, nodding to both men, apparently amused by the situation.

But underneath, Mr. Lee was thinking, A brilliant bold type of stroke by the thing that calls itself Wilbur Mercer, this hooking up of Crofts with Meritan direct. It undoubtedly foresaw that Crofts would receive the strong emanations from the movement’s core. The next step is that Crofts will again consult an empathy box — if he can find one — and this time Mercer itself will address him personally. Address its new disciple.

They have gained a man, Mr. Lee realized. They are ahead. But ultimately we will win. Because ultimately we will manage to destroy all the empathy boxes, and without them Wilbur Mercer can do nothing. This is the only way he has — or *it* has — of reaching and controlling people, as it has done here with unfortunate Mr. Crofts. *Without the empathy boxes the movement is helpless.*

VI

At the UWA desk, at Rocky Field in New York City, Joan Hiashi said to the uniformed clerk, “I want to buy a one-way ticket to Los Angeles on the next flight. Jet or rocket; it doesn’t matter. I just want to get there.”

“First class or tourist?” the clerk asked.

“Aw, hell,” Joan said wearily, “just sell me a ticket. Any kind of a ticket.” She opened her purse.

As she started to pay for the ticket a hand stopped hers. She turned — and there stood Ray Meritan, his face twisting with relief.

“What a place to try to pick up your thoughts,” he said. “Come on, let’s go where it’s quiet. You have ten minutes before your flight.”

They hurried together through the building until they came to a deserted ramp. There they stopped, and Joan said, “Listen, Ray, I know it’s a trap for you. That’s why they let me out. But where else can I go except to you?”

Ray said, “Don’t worry about it. They were bound to pick me up sooner or later. I’m sure they know I left California and came here.” He glanced around. “No FBI agents near us yet. At least I don’t pick up anything suggesting it.” He lit a cigarette.

“I don’t have any reason to go back to L.A.,” Joan said, “now that you’re here. I might as well cancel my flight.”

“You know they’re picking up and destroying all the empathy boxes they can,” Ray said.

“No,” she said. “I didn’t know; I was just released half an hour ago. That’s dreadful. They really mean business.”

Ray laughed. “Let’s say they’re really frightened.” He put his arm around her and kissed her. “I tell you what we’ll do. We’ll try to sneak out of this place, go to the lower East Side and rent a little cold-water walk-up. We’ll hide out and find an empathy box they missed.” But, he thought, it’s unlikely; they probably have them all by now. There weren’t that many to start with.

“Anything you say,” Joan said drably.

“Do you love me?” he asked her. “I can read your mind; you do.” And then he said quietly, “I can also read the mind of a Mr. Lewis Scanlan, an FBI man who’s now at the UWA desk. What name did you give?”

“Mrs. George McIsaacs,” Joan said. “I think.” She examined her ticket and envelope. “Yes, that’s right.”

“But Scanlan is asking if a japanese woman has been at the desk in the last fifteen minutes,” Ray said. “And the clerk remembers you. So —” He took hold of Joan’s arm. “We better get started.”

They hurried down the deserted ramp, passed through an electric-eye operated door and came out in a baggage lobby. Everyone there was far too busy to pay any attention as Ray Meritan and Joan threaded their way to the street door and, a moment later, stepped out onto the chill gray sidewalk where cabs had parked in a long double row. Joan started to hail a cab…

“Wait,” Ray said, pulling her back. “I’m getting a jumble of thoughts. One of the cab drivers is an FBI man but I can’t tell which.” He stood uncertainly, not knowing what to do.

“We can’t get away, can we?” Joan said.

“It’s going to be hard.” To himself he thought, More like impossible; you’re right. He experienced the girl’s confused, frightened thoughts, her anxiety about him, that she had made it possible for them to locate and capture him, her fierce desire not to return to jail, her pervasive bitterness at having been betrayed by Mr. Lee, the Chinese Communist bigshot who had met her in Cuba.

“What a life,” Joan said, standing close to him.

And still he did not know which cab to take. One precious second after another escaped as he stood there. “Listen,” he said to Joan, “maybe we should separate.”

“No,” she said clinging to him. “I can’t stand to do it alone any more. Please.”

A bewhiskered peddler walked up to them with a tray suspended by a cord which ran about his neck. “Hi, folks,” he mumbled.

“Not now,” Joan said to him.

“Free sample of breakfast cereal,” the peddler said. “No cost. Just take a box, miss. You mister. Take one.” He extended the tray of small, gaily colored cartons toward Ray.

Strange, Ray thought. I’m not picking up anything from this man’s mind. He stared at the peddler, saw — or thought he saw — a peculiar insubstantiality to the man. A diffused quality.

Ray took one of the samples of breakfast cereal.

“Merry Meal, it’s called,” the peddler said. “A new product they’re introducing to the public. There’s a coupon inside. Entitles you to —”

“Okay,” Ray said, sticking the box in his pocket. He took hold of Joan and led her along the line of cabs. He chose one at random and opened the rear door. “Get in,” he said urgently to her.

“I took a sample of Merry Meal, too,” she said with a wan smile as he seated himself beside her. The cab started up, left the line and pulled past the entrance of the airfield terminal. “Ray, there was something strange about that salesman. It was as if he wasn’t actually there, as if he was nothing more than — a picture.”

As the cab drove down the auto ramp, away from the terminal, another cab left the line and followed after them. Twisting, Ray saw riding in the back of it two well-fed men in dark business suits. FBI men, he said to himself.

Joan said, “Didn’t that cereal salesman remind you of anyone?”

“Who?”

“A little of Wilbur Mercer. But I haven’t seen him enough to —” Ray grabbed the cereal box from her hand, tore the cardboard top from it. Poking up from the dry cereal he saw the corner of the coupon the peddler had spoken about; he lifted out the coupon, held it up and studied it. The coupon said in large clear printing:

HOW TO ASSEMBLE AN EMPATHY BOX

FROM ORDINARY HOUSEHOLD OBJECTS

“It was them,” he said to Joan.

He put the coupon carefully away in his pocket, then he changed his mind.

Folding it up, he tucked it in the cuff of his trousers. Where the FBI possibly wouldn’t find it.

Behind them, the other cab came closer, and now he picked up the thoughts of the two men. They were FBI agents; he had been right. He settled back against the seat.

There was nothing to do but wait.

Joan said, “Could I have the other coupon?”

“Sorry.” He got out the other cereal package. She opened it, found the coupon inside and, after a pause, folded it and hid it in the hem of her skirt.

“I wonder how many there are of those so-called peddlers,” Ray said musingly. “I’d be interested to know how many free samples of Merry Meal they’re going to manage to give away before they’re caught.”

The first ordinary household object needed was a common radio set; he had noticed that. The second, the filament from a five-year light-bulb. And next — he’d have to look again, but now was not the time. The other cab had drawn abreast with theirs.

Later. And if the authorities found the coupon in the cuff of his trousers, *they,* he knew, would somehow manage to bring him another.

He put his arm around Joan. “I think we’ll be all right.”

The other cab, now, was nosing theirs to the curb and the two FBI men were waving in a menacing, official manner to the driver to stop.

“Shall I stop?” the driver said tensely to Ray.

“Sure,” he said. And, taking a deep breath, prepared himself.

The War with the Fnools

Captain Edgar Lightfoot of CIA said, “Darn it, the Fnools are back again, Major. They’ve taken over Provo, Utah.”

With a groan, Major Hauk signaled his secretary to bring him the Fnool dossier from the locked archives. “What form are they assuming this time?” he asked briskly.

“Tiny real-estate salesmen,” Lightfoot said.

Last time, Major Hauk reflected, it had been filling station attendants. That was the thing about the Fnools. When one took a particular shape they all took that shape. Of course, it made detection for CIA fieldmen much easier. But it did make the Fnools look absurd, and Hauk did not enjoy fighting an absurd enemy; it was a quality which tended to diffuse over both sides and even up to his own office.

“Do you think they’d come to terms?” Hauk said, half-rhetorically. “We could afford to sacrifice Provo, Utah, if they’d be willing to circumscribe themselves there. We could even add those portions of Salt Lake City which are paved with hideous old red brick.”

Lightfoot said, “Fnools never compromise, Major. Their goal is Sol System domination. For all time.”

Leaning over Major Hauk’s shoulder, Miss Smith said, “Here is the Fnool dossier, sir.” With her free hand she pressed the top of her blouse against herself in a gesture indicating either advanced tuberculosis or advanced modesty. There were certain indications that it was the latter.

“Miss Smith,” Major Hauk complained, “here are the Fnools trying to take over the Sol System and I’m handed their dossier by a woman with a forty-two inch bosom. Isn’t that a trifle schizophrenic — for me, at least?” He carefully averted his eyes from her, remembering his wife and the two children. “Wear something else from here on out,” he told her. “Or swaddle yourself. I mean, my God, let’s be reasonable: let’s be realistic.”

“Yes, Major,” Miss Smith said. “But remember, I was selected at random from the CIA employees pool. I didn’t *ask* to be your secretary.”

With Captain Lightfoot beside him, Major Hauk laid out the documents that made up the Fnool dossier.

In the Smithsonian there was a huge Fnool, standing three feet high, stuffed and preserved in a natural habitat-type cubicle. School children for years had marveled at this Fnool, which was shown with pistol aimed at Terran innocents. By pressing a button, the school children caused the Terrans (not stuffed but imitation) to flee, whereupon the Fnool extinguished them with its advanced solar-powered weapon… and the exhibit reverted to its original stately scene, ready to begin all over again.

Major Hauk had seen the exhibit, and it made him uneasy. The Fnools, he had declared time and time again, were no joke. But there was something about a Fnool that — well, a Fnool was an idiotic life form. That was the basis of it. No matter what it imitated it retained its midget aspect; a Fnool looked like something given away free at supermarket openings, along with balloons and moist purple orchids. No doubt, Major Hauk had ruminated, it was a survival factor. It disarmed the Fnool’s opponents. Even the name. It was just not possible to take them seriously, even at this very moment when they were infesting Provo, Utah, in the form of miniature real-estate salesmen.

Hauk instructed, “Capture a Fnool in this current guise, Lightfoot, bring it to me and I’ll parley. I feel like capitulating, this time. I’ve been fighting them for twenty years now. I’m worn out.”

“If you get one face to face with you,” Lightfoot cautioned, “it may successfully imitate you and that would be the end. We would have to incinerate both of you, just to be on the safe side.”

Gloomily, Hauk said, “I’ll set up a key password situation with you right now, Captain. The word is *masticate.* I’ll use it in a sentence… for instance, ‘I’ve got to thoroughly masticate these data.’ The Fnool won’t know that — correct?”

“Yes, Major,” Captain Lightfoot sighed and left the CIA office at once, hurrying to the ‘copter field across the street to begin his trip to Provo, Utah. But he had a feeling of foreboding.

When his ‘copter landed at the end of Provo Canyon on the outskirts of the town, he was at once approached by a two-foot-high man in a gray business suit carrying a briefcase.

“Good morning, sir,” the Fnool piped. “Care to look at some choice lots, all with unobstructed views? Can be subdivided into —”

“Get in the ‘copter,” Lightfoot said, aiming his Army-issue .45 at the Fnool.

“Listen, my friend,” the Fnool said, in a jolly tone of voice. “I can see you’ve never really given any hardheaded thought to the meaning of our race having landed on your planet. Why don’t we step into the office a moment and sit down?” The Fnool indicated a nearby small building in which Lightfoot saw a desk and chairs. Over the office there was a sign:

EARLY BIRD

LAND DEVELOPMENT

INCORPORATED

” ‘The early bird catches the worm,’ ” the Fnool declared. “And the spoils go to the winner, Captain Lightfoot. By nature’s laws, if we manage

to infest your planet and pre-empt you, we've got all the forces of evolution and biology on our side." The Fnool beamed cheerily.

Lightfoot said, "There's a CIA major back in Washington, D.C. who's on to you."

"Major Hauk has defeated us twice," the Fnool admitted. "We respect him. But he's a voice crying in the wilderness, in this country, at least. You know perfectly well, Captain, that the average American viewing that exhibit at the Smithsonian merely smiles in a tolerant fashion. There's just no awareness of the *menace*."

By now two other Fnools, also in the form of tiny real-estate salesmen in gray business suits carrying briefcases, had approached. "Look," one said to the other. "Charley's captured a Terran."

"No," its companion disagreed, "the Terran captured him."

"All three of you get in the CIA 'copter," Lightfoot ordered, waving his .45 at them.

"You're making a mistake," the first Fnool said, shaking its head. "But you're a young man; you'll mature in time." It walked to the 'copter. Then, all at once, it spun and cried, "*Death to the Terrans*!"

Its briefcase whipped up, a bolt of pure solar energy whined past Lightfoot's right ear. Lightfoot dropped to one knee and squeezed the trigger of the .45; the Fnool, in the doorway of the 'copter, pitched head-forward and lay with its briefcase beside it. The other two Fnools watched as Lightfoot cautiously kicked the briefcase away.

"Young," one of the remaining Fnools said, "but with quick reflexes. Did you see the way he dropped on one knee?"

“Terrans are no joke,” the other agreed. “We’ve got an uphill battle ahead of us.”

“As long as you’re here,” the first of the remaining Fnools said to Lightfoot, “why don’t you put a small deposit down on some valuable unimproved land we’ve got a listing for? I’ll be glad to run you out to have a look at it. Water and electricity available at a slight additional cost.”

“Get in the ‘copter,” Lightfoot repeated, aiming his gun steadily at them.

In Berlin, an *Oberstleutnant* of the SHD, the *Sicherheitsdienst* — the West German Security Service — approaching his commanding officer, saluted in what is termed Roman style and said, “*General, die Fnoolen sind wieder zuruck. Was sollen wir jetz tun*?”

“The Fnools are *back*?” Hochflieger said, horrified. “Already? But it was only three years ago that we uncovered their network and eradicated them.” Jumping to his feet General Hochflieger paced about his cramped temporary office in the basement of the *Bundesrat Gebaude,* his large hands clasped behind his back. “And what guise this time? Assistant Ministers of Domestic Finance, as before?”

“No sir,” the *Oberstleutnant* said. “They have come as gear inspectors of the VW works. Brown suit, clipboard, thick glasses, middle-aged. Fussy. And, as before, *nur* six-tenths of a meter high.”

“What I detest about the Fnools,” Hochflieger said, “is their ruthless use of science in the service of destruction, especially their medical techniques. They almost defeated us with that virus infection suspended in the gum on the backs of multi-color commemorative stamps.”

“A desperate weapon,” his subordinate agreed, “but rather too fantastic to be successful, ultimately. This time they’ll probably rely on crushing force combined with an absolutely synchronized timetable.”

"Selbsverstandlich," Hochflieger agreed. "But we've nonetheless got to react and defeat them. Inform Terpol." That was the Terra-wide organization of counterintelligence with headquarters on Luna. "Where, specifically, have they been detected?"

"In Schweinfurt only, so far."

"Perhaps we should obliterate the Schweinfurt area."

"They'll only turn up elsewhere."

"True." Hochflieger brooded. "What we must do is pursue Operation *Hundefutter* to successful culmination." *Hundefutter* had developed for the West German Government a sub-species of Terrans six-tenths of a meter high and capable of assuming a variety of forms. They would be used to penetrate the network of Fnool activity and destroy it from within. *Hundefutter,* financed by the Krupp family, had been held in readiness for just this moment.

"I'll activate *Kommando Einsatzgruppe II*," his subordinate said. "As counter-Fnools they can begin to drop behind Fnool lines near the Schweinfurt area immediately. By nightfall the situation should be in our hands."

"Gruss Gott," Hochflieger prayed, nodding. "Well, get the *kommando* started, and we'll keep our ears open to see how it proceeds."

If it failed, he realized, more desperate measures would have to be initiated.

The survival of our race is at stake, Hochflieger said to himself. The next four thousand years of history will be determined by the brave act of a member of the SHD at this hour. Perhaps myself.

He paced about, meditating on that.

In Warsaw the local chief of the People's Protective Agency for Preserving the Democratic Process — the NNBNDL — read the coded teletype dispatch several times as he sat at his desk drinking tea and eating a late breakfast of sweet rolls and Polish ham. This time disguised as chess players, Serge Nicov said to himself. And each Fnool making use of the queen's pawn opening, Qp to Q3… a weak opening, he reflected, especially against Kp to K4, even if they draw white. But —

Still a potentially dangerous situation.

On a piece of official stationery he wrote *select out class of chess players employing queen's pawn opening.* For Invigorating Forest-renewal Team, he decided. Fnools are small, but they can plant saplings… we must get some use out of them. Seeds; they can plant sunflower seeds for our tundra-removal vegetable-oil venture.

A year of hard physical work, he decided, and they'll think twice before they invade Terra again.

On the other hand, we could make a deal with them, offer them an alternative to invigorating forest-renewal activity. They could enter the Army as a special brigade and be used in Chile, in the rugged mountains. Being only sixty-one centimeters high, many of them could be packed into a single nuclear sub for transport… but can Fnools be trusted?

The thing he hated most about Fnools — and he had learned to know them in their previous invasions of Terra — was their deceitfulness. Last time they had taken the physical form of a troupe of ethnic dancers… and what dancers they had turned out to be. They had massacred an audience in Leningrad before anyone could intervene, men, women and children all dead on the spot by weapons of ingenious design and sturdy although monotonous construction which had masqueraded as folk-instruments of a five-stringed variety.

It could never happen again; all Democratic lands were alert, now; special youth groups had been set up to keep vigil. But something new — such as this chess-player deception — could succeed as well, especially in small towns in the East republics, where chess players were enthusiastically welcomed.

From a hidden compartment in his desk Serge Nicov brought out the special non-dial phone, picked up the receiver and said into the mouthpiece, “Fnools back, in North Caucasus area. Better get as many tanks as possible lined up to accept their advance as they attempt to spread out. Contain them and then cut directly through their center, bisecting them repeatedly until they’re splintered and can be dealt with in small bands.”

“Yes, Political Officer Nicov.”

Serge Nicov hung up and resumed eating his — now cold — late breakfast.

As Captain Lightfoot piloted the ‘copter back to Washington, D.C. one of the two captured Fnools said, “How is it that no matter what guise we come in, you Terrans can always detect us? We’ve appeared on your planet as filling station attendants, Volkswagen gear inspectors, chess champions, folk singers complete with native instruments, minor government officials, and now real-estate salesmen —”

Lightfoot said, “It’s your size.”

“That concept conveys nothing to us.”

“You’re only two feet tall!”

The two Fnools conferred, and then the other Fnool patiently explained, “But size is relative. We have all the absolute qualities of Terrans embodied in our temporary forms, and according to obvious logic —”

“Look,” Lightfoot said, “stand here next to me.” The Fnool, in its gray business suit, carrying its briefcase, came cautiously up to stand beside him. “You just come up to my knee cap,” Lightfoot pointed out. “I’m six feet high. You’re only one-third as tall as I. In a group of Terrans you Fnools stand out like an egg in a barrel of kosher pickles.”

“Is that a folk saying?” the Fnool asked. “I’d better write that down.” From its coat pocket it produced a tiny ball point pen no longer than a match. “Egg in barrel of pickles. Quaint. I hope, when we’ve wiped out your civilization, that some of your ethnic customs will be preserved by our museums.”

“I hope so, too,” Lightfoot said, lighting a cigarette.

The other Fnool, pondering, said, “I wonder if there’s any way we can grow taller. Is it a racial secret preserved by your people?” Noticing the burning cigarette dangling between Lightfoot’s lips, the Fnool said, “Is that how you achieve unnatural height? By burning that stick of compressed dried vegetable fibers and inhaling the smoke?”

“Yes,” Lightfoot said, handing the cigarette to the two-foot-high Fnool. “That’s our secret. Cigarette-smoking makes you grow. We have all our offspring, especially teenagers, smoke. Everyone that’s young.”

“I’m going to try it,” the Fnool said to its companion. Placing the cigarette between its lips, it inhaled deeply.

Lightfoot blinked. Because the Fnool was now four feet high, and its companion instantly imitated it; both Fnools were twice as high as before. Smoking the cigarette had augmented the Fnools’ height incredibly by two whole feet.

“Thank you,” the now four-foot-high real-estate salesman said to Lightfoot, in a much deeper voice than before. “We are certainly making bold strides, are we not?”

Nervously, Lightfoot said, “Gimme back the cigarette.”

In his office at the CIA building, Major Julius Hauk pressed a button on his desk, and Miss Smith alertly opened the door and entered the room, dictation pad in hand.

“Miss Smith,” Major Hauk said, “Captain Lightfoot’s away. Now I can tell you. The Fnools are going to win this time. As senior officer in charge of defeating them, I’m about to give up and go down to the bomb-proof shelter constructed for hopeless situations such as this.”

“I’m sorry to hear that, sir,” Miss Smith said, her long eyelashes fluttering. “I’ve enjoyed working for you.”

“But you, too,” Hauk explained. “*All* Terrans are wiped out; our defeat is planet-wide.” Opening a drawer of his desk he brought out an unopened fifth of Bullock & Lade Scotch which he had been given as a birthday present. “I’m going to finish this B & L Scotch off first,” he informed Miss Smith. “Will you join me?”

“No thank you, sir,” Miss Smith said. “I’m afraid I don’t drink, at least during the daylight hours.”

Major Hauk drank for a moment from a dixie cup, then tried a little more from the bottle just to be sure it was Scotch all the way to the bottom. At last he put it down and said, “It’s hard to believe that our backs could be put to the wall by creatures no larger than domestic orange-striped tomcats, but such is the case.” He nodded courteously to Miss Smith. “I’m off for the concrete subsurface bomb-proof shelter, where I hope to hold out after the general collapse of life as we know it.”

“Good for you, Major Hauk,” Miss Smith said, a little uneasily. “But are you — just going to *leave* me here to become a captive of the Fnools? I mean —” Her sharply pointed breasts quivered in becoming unison beneath her blouse. “It seems sort of mean.”

“You have nothing to fear from the Fnools, Miss Smith,” Major Hauk said. “After all, two feet tall —” He gestured. “Even a neurotic young woman could scarcely —” He laughed. “Really.”

“But it’s a terrible feeling,” Miss Smith said, “to be abandoned in the face of what we know to be an unnatural enemy from another planet entirely.”

“I tell you what,” Major Hauk said thoughtfully. “Perhaps I’ll break a series of strict CIA rulings and allow you to go below to the shelter with me.”

Putting down her pad and pencil and hurrying over to him, Miss Smith breathed, “Oh, Major, how can I thank you!”

“Just come along,” Major Hauk said, leaving the bottle of B & L Scotch behind in his haste, the situation being what it was.

Miss Smith clung to him as he made his way a trifle unsteadily down the corridor to the elevator.

“Drat that Scotch,” he murmured. “Miss Smith, Vivian, you were wise not to touch it. Given the cortico-thalamic reaction we are all experiencing in the face of the Fnoolian peril, Scotch isn’t the beneficial balm it generally is.”

“Here,” his secretary said, sliding under his arm to help prop him up as they waited for the elevator. “Try to stand firm, Major. It won’t be long now.”

“You have a point there,” Major Hauk agreed. “Vivian, my dear.”

The elevator came at last. It was the self-service type.

“You’re being really very kind to me,” Miss Smith said, as the Major pressed the proper button and the elevator began to descend.

“Well, it may prolong your life,” Major Hauk agreed. “Of course, that far underground… the average temperature is much greater than at the Earth’s surface. Like a deep mine shaft, it runs in the near-hundreds.”

“But at least we’ll be alive,” Miss Smith pointed out.

Major Hauk removed his coat and tie. “Be prepared for the humid warmth,” he told her. “Here, perhaps you would like to remove your coat.”

“Yes,” Miss Smith said, allowing him in his gentlemanly way to remove her coat.

The elevator arrived at the shelter. No one was there ahead of them, fortunately; they had the shelter all to themselves.

“It *is* stuffy down here,” Miss Smith said as Major Hauk switched on one dim yellow light. “Oh dear.” She stumbled over something in the gloom. “It’s so hard to see.” Again she stumbled over some object; this time she half-fell. “Shouldn’t we have more light, Major?”

“What, and attract the Fnools?” In the dark, Major Hauk felt about until he located her; Miss Smith had toppled onto one of the shelter’s many bunks and was groping about for her shoe.

“I think I broke the heel off,” Miss Smith said.

“Well, at least you got away with your life,” Major Hauk said. “If nothing else.” In the gloom he began to assist her in removing her other shoe, it being worthless now.

“How long will we be down here?” Miss Smith asked.

“As long as the Fnools are in control,” Major Hauk informed her. “You’d better change into radiation-proof garb in case the rotten little nonterrestrials try H-bombing the White House. Here, I’ll take your blouse and skirt — there should be overalls somewhere around.”

“You’re being really kind to me,” Miss Smith breathed, as she handed him her blouse and skirt. “I can’t get over it.”

“I think,” Major Hauk said, “I’ll change my mind and go back up for that Scotch; we’ll be down here longer than I anticipated and we’ll need something like that as the solitude frays our nerves. You stay here.” He felt his way back to the elevator.

“Don’t be gone long,” Miss Smith called anxiously after him. “I feel terribly exposed and unprotected down here alone, and what is more I can’t seem to find that radiation-proof garb you spoke of.”

“Be right back,” Major Hauk promised.

At the field opposite the CIA Building, Captain Lightfoot landed the ‘copter with the two captive Fnools aboard. “Get moving,” he instructed them, digging the muzzle of his Service .45 into their small ribs.

“It’s because he’s bigger than us, Len,” one of the Fnools said to the other. “If we were the same size he wouldn’t dare treat us this way. But now we understand — finally — the nature of the Terrans’ superiority.”

“Yes,” the other Fnool said. “The mystery of twenty years has been cleared up.”

“Four feet tall is still suspicious-looking,” Captain Lightfoot said, but he was thinking, If they grow from two feet to four feet in one instant, just by smoking a cigarette, what’s to stop them from growing two feet more? Then they’ll be six feet and look exactly like us.

And it’s all my fault, he said to himself miserably.

Major Hauk will destroy me, careerwise if not body-wise.

However, he continued on as best he could; the famous tradition of the CIA demanded it. “I’m taking you directly to Major Hauk,” he told the two Fnools. “He’ll know what to do with you.”

When they reached Major Hauk’s office, no one was there.

“This is strange,” Captain Lightfoot said.

“Maybe Major Hauk has beaten a hasty retreat,” one of the Fnools said. “Does this tall amber bottle indicate anything?”

“That’s a tall amber bottle of Scotch,” Lightfoot said, scrutinizing it. “And it indicates nothing. However —” he removed the cap — “I’ll try it. Just to be on the safe side.”

After he had tried it, he found the two Fnools staring at him intently.

“This is what Terrans deem drink,” Lightfoot explained. “It would be bad for you.”

“Possibly,” one of the two Fnools said, “but while you were drinking from that bottle I obtained your .45 Service revolver. Hands up.”

Lightfoot, reluctantly, raised his hands.

“Give us that bottle,” the Fnool said. “And let us try it for ourselves; we will be denied nothing. For in point of fact, Terran culture lies open before us.”

“Drink will put an end to you,” Lightfoot said desperately.

“As that burning tube of aged vegetable matter did?” the nearer of the two Fnools said with contempt.

It and its companion drained the bottle as Lightfoot watched. Sure enough, they now stood six feet high. And, he knew, everywhere in the world, all Fnools had assumed equal stature. Because of him, the invasion of the Fnools would this time be successful. He had destroyed Terra. “Cheers,” the first Fnool said.

“Down the hatch,” the other said. “Ring-a-ding.” They studied Lightfoot. “You’ve shrunk to our size.”

“No, Len,” the other said. “We have expanded to his.”

“Then at last we’re all equal,” Len said. “We’re finally a success. The magic defense of the Terrans — their unnatural size — has been eradicated.”

At that point a voice said, “Drop that .45 Service revolver.” And Major Hauk stepped into the room behind the two thoroughly drunken Fnools.

“Well I’ll be goddamned,” the first Fnool mumbled. “Look, Len, it’s the man most responsible for previously defeating us.”

“And he’s little,” Len said. “Little, like us. We’re all little, now. I mean, we’re all huge; goddamn it, it’s the same thing. Anyhow we’re equal.” It lurched toward Major Hauk —

Major Hauk fired. And the Fnool named Len dropped. It was absolutely undeniably dead. Only one of the captured Fnools remained.

“Edgar, they’ve increased in size,” Major Hauk said, pale. “Why?”

“It’s due to me,” Lightfoot admitted. “First because of the cigarette, then second because of the Scotch — your Scotch, Major, that your wife gave you on your last birthday. I admit their now being the same size as us makes

them undistinguishable from us… but consider this, sir. *What if they grew once more*?”

“I see your idea clearly,” Major Hauk said, after a pause. “If eight feet tall, the Fnools would be as conspicuous as they were when —”

The captured Fnool made a dash for freedom.

Major Hauk fired, low, but it was too late; the Fnool was out into the corridor and racing toward the elevator.

“Get it!” Major Hauk shouted.

The Fnool reached the elevator and without hesitation pressed the button; some extraterrestrial Fnoolian knowledge guided its hand.

“It’s getting away,” Lightfoot grated.

Now the elevator had come. “It’s going down to the bomb-proof shelter,” Major Hauk yelled in dismay.

“Good,” Lightfoot said grimly. “We’ll be able to capture it with no trouble.”

“Yes, but —” Major Hauk began, and then broke off. “You’re right, Lightfoot; we must capture it. Once out on the street — It would be like any other man in a gray business suit carrying a briefcase.”

“How can it be made to grow again?” Lightfoot said, as he and Major Hauk descended by means of the stairs. “A cigarette started it, then the Scotch — both new to Fnools. What would complete their growth, make them a bizarre eight feet tall?” He racked his brain as they dashed down and down, until at last the concrete and steel entrance of the shelter lay before them.

The Fnool was already inside.

“That’s, um, Miss Smith you hear,” Major Hauk admitted. “She was, or rather actually, we were — well, we were taking refuge from the invasion down here.”

Putting his weight against the door, Lightfoot swung it aside.

Miss Smith at once hopped up, ran toward them and a moment later clung to the two men, safe now from the Fnool. “Thank God,” she gasped. “I didn’t realize what it was until —” She shuddered.

“Major,” Captain Lightfoot said, “I think we’ve stumbled on it.”

Rapidly, Major Hauk said, “Captain, you get Miss Smith’s clothes, I’ll take care of the Fnool. There’s no problem now.”

The Fnool, eight feet high, came slowly toward them, its hands raised.

Precious Artifact

Below the ‘copter of Milt Biskle lay newly fertile lands. He had done well with his area of Mars, verdant from his reconstruction of the ancient water-network. Spring, two springs each year, had been brought to this autumn world of sand and hopping toads, a land once made of dried soil cracking with the dust of former times, of a dreary and unwatered waste. Victim of the recent Prox-Terra conflict.

Quite soon the first Terran emigrants would appear, stake their claims and take over. He could retire. Perhaps he could return to Terra or bring his own family here, receive priority of land-acquisition — as a reconstruct engineer he deserved it. Area Yellow had progressed far faster than the other engineers’ sections. And now his reward came.

Reaching forward, Milt Biskle touched the button of his long-range transmitter. “This is Reconstruct Engineer Yellow,” he said. “I’d like a psychiatrist. Any one will do, so long as he’s immediately available.”

When Milt Biskle entered the office Dr. DeWinter rose and held out his hand. “I’ve heard,” Dr. DeWinter said, “that you, of all the forty odd reconstruct engineers, have been the most creative. It’s no wonder you’re tired. Even God had to rest after six days of such work, and you’ve been at it for years. As I was waiting for you to reach me I received a news memo from Terra that will interest you.” He picked the memo up from his desk. “The initial transport of settlers is about to arrive here on Mars… and they’ll go directly into your area. Congratulations, Mr. Biskle.”

Rousing himself Milt Biskle said, “What if I returned to Earth?”

“But if you mean to stake a claim for your family, here —”

Milt Biskle said, “I want you to do something for me. I feel too tired, too —” He gestured. “Or depressed, maybe. Anyhow I’d like you to make arrangements for my gear, including my wug-plant, to be put aboard a transport returning to Terra.”

“Six years of work,” Dr. DeWinter said. “And now you’re abandoning your recompense. Recently I visited Earth and it’s just as you remember —”

“How do you know how I remember it?”

“Rather,” DeWinter corrected himself smoothly, “I should say it’s just as it was. Overcrowded, tiny conapts with seven families to a single cramped kitchen. Autobahns so crowded you can’t make a move until eleven in the morning.”

“For me,” Milt Biskle said, “the overcrowding will be a relief after six years of robot autonomic equipment.” He had made up his mind. In spite of what he had accomplished here, or perhaps because of it, he intended to go home. Despite the psychiatrist’s arguments.

Dr. DeWinter purred, “What if your wife and children, Milt, are among the passengers of this first transport?” Once more he lifted a document from his neatly-arranged desk. He studied the paper, then said, “Biskle, Fay, Mrs. Laura C. June C. Woman and two girl children. Your family?”

“Yes,” Milt Biskle admitted woodenly; he stared straight ahead.

“So you see you can’t head back to Earth. Put on your hair and prepare to meet them at Field Three. And exchange your teeth. You’ve got the stainless steel ones in, at the moment.”

Chagrined, Biskle nodded. Like all Terrans he had lost his hair and teeth from the fallout during the war. For everyday service in his lonely job of re-reconstructing Yellow Area of Mars he made no use of the expensive wig which he had brought from Terra, and as to the teeth he personally found

the steel ones far more comfortable than the natural-color plastic set. It indicated how far he had drifted from social interaction. He felt vaguely guilty; Dr. DeWinter was right.

But he had felt guilty ever since the defeat of the Proxmen. The war had embittered him; it didn't seem fair that one of the two competing cultures would have to suffer, since the needs of both were legitimate.

Mars itself had been the locus of contention. Both cultures needed it as a colony on which to deposit surplus populations. Thank God Terra had managed to gain tactical mastery during the last year of the war… hence it was Terrans such as himself, and not Proxmen, patching up Mars.

"By the way," Dr. DeWinter said. "I happen to know of your intentions regarding your fellow reconstruct engineers."

Milt Biskle glanced up swiftly.

"As a matter of fact," Dr. DeWinter said, "we know they're at this moment gathering in Red Area to hear your account." Opening his desk drawer he got out a yo-yo, stood up and began to operate it expertly doing *walking the dog.*

"Your panic-stricken speech to the effect that something is wrong, although you can't seem to say just what it might be."

Watching the yo-yo Biskle said, "That's a toy popular in the Prox system. At least so I read in a homeopape article, once."

"Hmm. I understood it originated in the Philippines." Engrossed, Dr. DeWinter now did *around the world.* He did it well. "I'm taking the liberty of sending a disposition to the reconstruct engineers' gathering, testifying to your mental condition. It will be read aloud — sorry to say."

“I still intend to address the gathering,” Biskle said.

“Well, then there’s a compromise that occurs to me. Greet your little family when it arrives here on Mars and then we’ll arrange a trip to Terra for you. At our expense. And in exchange you’ll agree not to address the gathering of reconstruct engineers or burden them in any way with your nebulous forebodings.” DeWinter eyed him keenly. “After all, this is a critical moment. The first emigrants are arriving. We don’t want trouble; we don’t want to make anyone uneasy.”

“Would you do me a favor?” Biskle asked. “Show me that you’ve got a wig on. And that your teeth are false. Just so I can be sure that you’re a Terran.”

Dr. DeWinter tilted his wig and plucked out his set of false teeth.

“I’ll take the offer,” Milt Biskle said. “If you’ll agree to make certain that my wife obtains the parcel of land I set aside for her.”

Nodding, DeWinter tossed him a small white envelope. “Here’s your ticket. Round trip, of course, since you’ll be coming back.”

I hope so, Biskle thought as he picked up the ticket. But it depends on what I see on Terra. Or rather on what they *let* me see.

He had a feeling they’d let him see very little. In fact as little as Proxmanly possible.

When his ship reached Terra a smartly uniformed guide waited for him. “Mr. Biskle?” Trim and attractive and exceedingly young she stepped forward alertly. “I’m Mary Ableseth, your Tourplan companion. I’ll show you around the planet during your brief stay here.” She smiled brightly and very professionally. He was taken aback. “I’ll be with you constantly, night and day.”

“Night, too?” he managed to say.

“Yes, Mr. Biskle. That’s my job. We expect you to be disoriented due to your years of labor on Mars… labor we of Terra applaud and honor, as is right.” She fell in beside him, steering him toward a parked ‘copter. “Where would you like to go first? New York City? Broadway? To the night clubs and theaters and restaurants…”

“No, to Central Park. To sit on a bench.”

“But there is no more Central Park, Mr. Biskle. It was turned into a parking lot for government employees while you were on Mars.”

“I see,” Milt Biskle said. “Well, then Portsmouth Square in San Francisco will do.” He opened the door of the ‘copter.

“That, too, has become a parking lot,” Miss Ableseth said, with a sad shake of her long, luminous red hair. “We’re so darn overpopulated. Try again, Mr. Biskle; there are a few parks left, one in Kansas, I believe, and *two* in Utah in the south part near St. George.”

“This is bad news,” Milt said. “May I stop at that amphetamine dispenser and put in my dime? I need a stimulant to cheer me up.”

“Certainly,” Miss Ableseth said, nodding graciously.

Milt Biskle walked to the spaceport’s nearby stimulant dispenser, reached into his pocket, found a dime, and dropped the dime in the slot.

The dime fell completely through the dispenser and bounced onto the pavement.

“Odd,” Biskle said, puzzled.

“I think I can explain that,” Miss Ableseth said. “That dime of yours is a Martian dime, made for a lighter gravity.”

“Hmm,” Milt Biskle said, as he retrieved the dime. As Miss Ableseth had predicted he felt disoriented. He stood by as she put in a dime of her own and obtained the small tube of amphetamine stimulants for him.. Certainly her explanation seemed adequate. But —

“It is now eight P.M. local time,” Miss Ableseth said. “And I haven’t had dinner, although of course you have, aboard your ship. Why not take me to dinner? We can talk over a bottle of Pinot Noir and you can tell me these vague forebodings which have brought you to Terra, that something dire is wrong and that all your marvelous reconstruct work is pointless. I’d adore to hear about it.” She guided him back to the ‘copter and the two of them entered, squeezing into the back seat together. Milt Biskle found her to be warm and yielding, decidedly Terran; he became embarrassed and felt his heart pounding in effort-syndrome. It had been some time since he had been this close to a woman.

“Listen,” he said, as the automatic circuit of the ‘copter caused it to rise from the spaceport parking lot, “I’m married. I’ve got two children and I came here on business. I’m on Terra to prove that the Proxmen really won and that we few remaining Terrans are slaves of the Prox authorities, laboring for —” He gave up; it was hopeless. Miss Ableseth remained pressed against him.

“You really think,” Miss Ableseth said presently, as the ‘copter passed above New York City, “that I’m a Prox agent?”

“N-no,” Milt Biskle said. “I guess not.” It did not seem likely, under the circumstances.

“While you’re on Terra,” Miss Ableseth said, “why stay in an overcrowded, noisy hotel? Why not stay with me at my conapt in New Jersey? There’s plenty of room and you’re more than welcome.”

“Okay,” Biskle agreed, feeling the futility of arguing.

“Good.” Miss Ableseth gave an instruction to the ‘copter; it turned north. “We’ll have dinner there. It’ll save money, and at all the decent restaurants there’s a two-hour line this time of night, so it’s almost impossible to get a table. You’ve probably forgotten. How wonderful it’ll be when half our population can emigrate!”

“Yes,” Biskle said tightly. “And they’ll like Mars; we’ve done a good job.” He felt a measure of enthusiasm returning to him, a sense of pride in the reconstruct work he and his compatriots had done. “Wait until you see it, Miss Ableseth.”

“Call me Mary,” Miss Ableseth said, as she arranged her heavy scarlet wig; it had become dislodged during the last few moments in the cramped quarters of the ‘copter.

“Okay,” Biskle said, and, except for a nagging awareness of disloyalty to Fay, he felt a sense of well-being.

“Things happen fast on Terra,” Mary Ableseth said. “Due to the terrible pressure of overpopulation.” She pressed her teeth in place; they, too, had become dislodged

“So I see,” Milt Biskle agreed, and straightened his own wig and teeth, too. *Could I have been mistaken?* he asked himself. After all he could see the lights of New York below; Terra was decidedly not a depopulated ruin and its civilization was intact.

Or was this all an illusion, imposed on his percept-system by Prox psychiatric techniques unfamiliar to him? It was a fact that his dime had fallen completely through the amphetamine dispenser. Didn’t that indicate something was subtly, terribly wrong?

Perhaps the dispenser hadn’t really been there.

The next day he and Mary Ableseth visited one of the few remaining parks. In the southern part of Utah, near the mountains, the park although small was bright green and attractive. Milt Biskle lolled on the grass watching a squirrel progressing toward a tree in wicket-like leaps, its tail flowing behind it in a gray stream.

“No squirrels on Mars,” Milt Biskle said sleepily.

Wearing a slight sunsuit, Mary Ableseth stretched out on her back, eyes shut. “It’s nice here, Milt. I imagine Mars is like this.” Beyond the park heavy traffic moved along the freeway; the noise reminded Milt of the surf of the Pacific Ocean. It lulled him. All seemed well, and he tossed a peanut to the squirrel. The squirrel veered, wicket-hopped toward the peanut, its intelligent face twitching in response.

As it sat upright, holding the nut, Milt Biskle tossed a second nut off to the right. The squirrel heard it land among the maple leaves; its ears pricked up, and this reminded Milt of a game he once had played with a cat, an old sleepy tom which had belonged to him and his brother in the days before Terra had been so overpopulated, when pets were still legal. He had waited until Pumpkin — the tomcat — was almost asleep and then he had tossed a small object into the corner of the room. Pumpkin woke up. His eyes had flown open and his ears had pricked, turned, and he had sat for fifteen minutes listening and watching, brooding as to what had made the noise. It was a harmless way of teasing the old cat, and Milt felt sad, thinking how many years Pumpkin had been dead, now, his last legal pet. On Mars, though, pets would be legal again. That cheered him.

In fact on Mars, during his years of reconstruct work, he had possessed a pet. A Martian plant. He had brought it with him to Terra and it now stood on the living room coffee table in Mary Ableseth’s conapt, its limbs draped rather unhappily. It had not prospered in the unfamiliar Terran climate.

“Strange,” Milt murmured, “that my wug-plant isn’t thriving. I’d have thought in such a moist atmosphere…”

“It’s the gravity,” Mary said, eyes still shut, her bosom rising and falling regularly. She was almost asleep. “Too much for it.”

Milt regarded the supine form of the woman, remembering Pumpkin under similar circumstances. The hypnogogic moment, between waking and sleeping, when consciousness and unconsciousness became blended… reaching, he picked up a pebble.

He tossed the pebble into the leaves near Mary’s head.

At once she sat up, eyes open startled, her sunsuit falling from her.

Both her ears pricked up.

“But we Terrans,” Milt said, “have lost control of the musculature of our ears, Mary. On even a reflex basis.”

“What?” she murmured, blinking in confusion as she retied her sunsuit.

“Our ability to prick up our ears has atrophied,” Milt explained. “Unlike the dog and cat. Although to examine us morphologically you wouldn’t know because the muscles are still there. So you made an error.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Mary said, with a trace of sullenness. She turned her attention entirely to arranging the bra of her sunsuit, ignoring him.

“Let’s go back to the conapt,” Milt said, rising to his feet. He no longer felt like lolling in the park, because he could no longer believe in the park. Unreal squirrel, unreal grass… was it actually? Would they ever show him the substance beneath the illusion? He doubted it.

The squirrel followed them a short way as they walked to their parked ‘copter, then turned its attention to a family of Terrans which included two

small boys; the children threw nuts to the squirrel and it scampered in vigorous activity.

“Convincing,” Milt said. And it really was.

Mary said, “Too bad you couldn’t have seen Dr. DeWinter more, Milt. He could have helped you.” Her voice was oddly hard.

“I have no doubt of that,” Milt Biskle agreed as they reentered the parked ‘copter.

When they arrived back at Mary’s conapt he found his Martian wug-plant dead. It had evidently perished of dehydration.

“Don’t try to explain this,” he said to Mary as the two of them stood gazing down at the parched, dead stalks of the once active plant. “You know what it shows. Terra is supposedly more humid than Mars, even reconstructed Mars at its best. Yet this plant has completely dried out. There’s no moisture left on Terra because I suppose the Prox blasts emptied the seas. Right?”

Mary said nothing.

“What I don’t understand,” Milt said, “is why it’s worth it to you people to keep the illusion going. *I’ve finished my job*.”

After a pause Mary said, “Maybe there’re more planets requiring reconstruct work, Milt.”

“Your population is that great?”

“I was thinking of Terra. Here,” Mary said. “Reconstruct work on it will take generations; all the talent and ability you reconstruct engineers possess will be required.” She added, “I’m just following your hypothetical logic, of course.”

“So Terra’s our next job. That’s why you let me come here. In fact I’m going to *stay* here.” He realized that, thoroughly and utterly, in a flash of insight. “I won’t be going back to Mars and I won’t see Fay again. You’re replacing her.” It all made sense.

“Well,” Mary said, with a faint wry smile, “let’s say I’m attempting to.” She stroked his arm. Barefoot, still in her sunsuit, she moved slowly closer and closer to him.

Frightened, he backed away from her. Picking up the dead wug-plant he numbly carried it to the apt’s disposal chute and dropped the brittle, dry remains in. They vanished at once.

“And now,” Mary said busily, “we’re going to visit the Museum of Modern Art in New York and then, if we have time, the Smithsonian in Washington, D.C. They’ve asked me to keep you busy so you don’t start brooding.”

“But I am brooding,” Milt said as he watched her change from her sunsuit to a gray wool knit dress. Nothing can stop that, he said to himself. And you know it now. And as each reconstruct engineer finishes his area it’s going to happen again. I’m just the first.

At least I’m not alone, he realized. And felt somewhat better.

“How do I look?” Mary asked as she put on lipstick before the bedroom mirror.

“Fine,” he said listlessly, and wondered if Mary would meet each reconstruct engineer in turn, become the mistress of each. Not only is she not what she seems, he thought, but I don’t even get to keep her.

It seemed a gratuitous loss, easily avoided.

He was, he realized, beginning to like her. *Mary was alive*; that much was real. Terran or not. At least they had not lost the war to shadows; they had lost to authentic living organisms. He felt somewhat cheered.

“Ready for the Museum of Modern Art?” Mary said briskly, with a smile.

Later, at the Smithsonian, after he had viewed the Spirit of St. Louis and the Wright brothers’ incredibly ancient plane — it appeared to be at least a million years old — he caught sight of an exhibit which he had been anticipating.

Saying nothing to Mary — she was absorbed in studying a case of semiprecious stones in their natural uncut state — he slipped off and, a moment later, stood before a glass-walled section entitled

PROX MILITARY OF 2014

Three Prox soldiers stood frozen, their dark muzzles stained and grimy, side arms ready, in a makeshift shelter composed of the remains of one of their transports. A bloody Prox flag hung drably. This was a defeated enclave of the enemy; these three creatures were about to surrender or be killed.

A group of Terran visitors stood before the exhibit, gawking. Milt Biskle said to the man nearest him, “Convincing, isn’t it?”

“Sure is,” the man, middle-aged, with glasses and gray hair, agreed. “Were you in the war?” he asked Milt, glancing at him.

“I’m in reconstruct,” Milt said. “Yellow Engineer.”

“Oh.” The man nodded, impressed. “Boy, these Proxmen look scary. You’d almost expect them to step out of that exhibit and fight us to the death.” He grinned. “They put up a good fight before they gave in, those Proxmen; you have to give ‘em credit for that.”

Beside him the man's gray, taut wife said, "Those guns of theirs make me shiver. It's too realistic." Disapproving, she walked on.

"You're right," Milt Biskle said. "They do look frighteningly real, because of course they are." There was no point in creating an illusion of this sort because the genuine thing lay immediately at hand, readily available. Milt swung himself under the guard rail, reached the transparent glass of the exhibit, raised his foot and smashed the glass; it burst and rained down with a furious racket of shivering fragments.

As Mary came running, Milt snatched a rifle from one of the frozen Proxmen in the exhibit and turned it toward her.

She halted, breathing rapidly, eyeing him but saying nothing.

"I am willing to work for you," Milt said to her, holding the rifle expertly. "After all, if my own race no longer exists I can hardly reconstruct a colony world for them; even I can see that. But I want to know the truth. Show it to me and I'll go on with my job."

Mary said, "No, Milt, if you knew the truth you wouldn't go on. You'd turn that gun on yourself." She sounded calm, even compassionate, but her eyes were bright and enlarged, wary.

"Then I'll kill you," he said. And, after that, himself.

"Wait." She pondered. "Milt — this is difficult. You know absolutely nothing and yet look how miserable you are. How do you expect to feel when you can see your planet as it is? It's almost too much for me and I'm —" She hesitated.

"Say it."

"I'm just a —" she choked out the word — "a visitor."

“But I am right,” he said. “Say it. Admit it.”

“You’re right, Milt,” she sighed.

Two uniformed museum guards appeared, holding pistols. “You okay, Miss Ableseth?”

“For the present,” Mary said. She did not take her eyes off Milt and the rifle which he held. “Just wait,” she instructed the guards.

“Yes ma’am.” The guards waited. No one moved.

Milt said, “Did any Terran women survive?”

After a pause, Mary said, “No, Milt. But we Proxmen are within the same genus, as you well know. We can interbreed. Doesn’t that make you feel better?”

“Sure,” he said. “A lot better.” And he did feel like turning the rifle on himself now, without waiting. It was all he could do to resist the impulse. So he had been right; that thing had not been Fay, there at Field Three on Mars. “Listen,” he said to Mary Ableseth, “I want to go back to Mars again. I came here to learn something. I learned it, now I want to go back. Maybe I’ll talk to Dr. DeWinter again, maybe he can help me. Any objection to that?”

“No.” She seemed to understand how he felt. “After all, you did all your work there. You have a right to return. But eventually you have to begin here on Terra. We can wait a year or so, perhaps even two. But eventually Mars will be filled up and we’ll need the room. And it’s going to be so much harder here… as you’ll discover.” She tried to smile but failed; he saw the effort. “I’m sorry, Milt.”

“So am I,” Milt Biskle said. “Hell, I was sorry when that wug-plant died. I knew the truth then. It wasn’t just a guess.”

“You’ll be interested to know that your fellow reconstruct engineer Red, Cleveland Andre, addressed the meeting in your place. And passed your intimations on to them all, along with his own. They voted to send an official delegate here to Terra to investigate; he’s on his way now.”

“I’m interested,” Milt said. “But it doesn’t really matter. It hardly changes things.” He put down the rifle. “Can I go back to Mars now?” He felt tired. “Tell Dr. DeWinter I’m coming.” Tell him, he thought, to have every psychiatric technique in his repertory ready for me, because it will take a lot. “What about Earth’s animals?” he asked. “Did any forms at all survive? How about the dog and the cat?”

Mary glanced at the museum guards; a flicker of communication passed silently between them and then Mary said, “Maybe it’s all right after all.”

“What’s all right?” Milt Biskle said.

“For you to see. Just for a moment. You seem to be standing up to it better than we had expected. In our opinion you *are* entitled to that.” She added, “Yes, Milt, the dog and cat survived; they live here among the ruins. Come along and look.”

He followed after her, thinking to himself, Wasn’t she right the first time? Do I really want to look? Can I stand up to what exists in actuality — what they’ve felt the need of keeping from me up until now?

At the exit ramp of the museum Mary halted and said, “Go on outside, Milt. I’ll stay here. I’ll be waiting for you when you come back in.”

Haltingly, he descended the ramp.

And saw.

It was, of course, as she had said, ruins. The city had been decapitated, leveled three feet above ground-level; the buildings had become hollow squares, without contents, like some infinite arrangements of useless, ancient courtyards. He could not believe that what he saw was *new*; it seemed to him as if these abandoned remnants had always been there, exactly as they were now. And — how long would they remain this way?

To the right an elaborate but small-scale mechanical system had plopped itself down to a debris-filled street. As he watched, it extended a host of pseudopodia which burrowed inquisitively into the nearby foundations. The foundations, steel and cement, were abruptly pulverized; the bare ground, exposed, lay naked and dark brown, seared over from the atomic heat generated by the repair autonomic rig — a construct, Milt Biskle thought, not much different from those I employ on Mars. At least to some meager extent the rig had the task of clearing away the old. He knew from his own reconstruct work on Mars that it would be followed, probably within minutes, by an equally elaborate mechanism which would lay the groundwork for the new structures to come.

And, standing off to one side in the otherwise deserted street, watching this limited clearing-work in progress, two gray, thin figures could be made out. Two hawk-nosed Proxmen with their pale, natural hair arranged in high coils, their earlobes elongated with heavy weights.

The victors, he thought to himself. Experiencing the satisfaction of this spectacle, witnessing the last artifacts of the defeated race being obliterated. Some day a purely Prox city will rise up here: Prox architecture, streets of the odd, wide Prox pattern, the uniform box-like buildings with their many subsurface levels. And citizens such as these will be treading the ramps, accepting the high-speed runnels in their daily routines. And what, he thought, about the Terran dogs and cats which now inhabit these ruins, as Mary said? Will even they disappear? Probably not entirely. There will be room for them, perhaps in museums and zoos, as oddities to be gaped at. Survivals of an ecology which no longer obtained. Or even mattered.

And yet — Mary was right. The Proxmen were within the same genus. Even if they did not interbreed with the remaining Terrans the species as he had known it would go on. And they would interbreed, he thought. His own relationship with Mary was a harbinger. As individuals they were not so far apart. The results might even be good.

The results, he thought as he turned away and started back into the museum, may be a race not quite Prox and not quite Terran; something that is genuinely new may come from the melding. At least we can hope so.

Terra would be rebuilt. He had seen slight but real work in progress with his own eyes. Perhaps the Proxmen lacked the skill that he and his fellow reconstruct engineers possessed… but now that Mars was virtually done they could begin here. It was not absolutely hopeless. Not *quite.*

Walking up to Mary he said hoarsely, “Do me a favor. Get me a cat I can take back to Mars with me. I’ve always liked cats. Especially the orange ones with stripes.”

One of the museum guards, after a glance at his companion, said, “We can arrange that, Mr. Biskle. We can get a — cub, is that the word?”

“Kitten, I think,” Mary corrected.

On the trip back to Mars, Milt Biskle sat with the box containing the orange kitten on his lap, working out his plans. In fifteen minutes the ship would land on Mars and Dr. DeWinter — or the thing that posed as Dr. DeWinter anyhow — would be waiting to meet him. And it would be too late. From where he sat he could see the emergency escape hatch with its red warning light. His plans had become focussed around the hatch. It was not ideal but it would serve.

In the box the orange kitten reached up a paw and batted at Milt’s hand. He felt the sharp, tiny claws rake across his hand and he absently

disengaged his flesh, retreating from the probing reach of the animal. You wouldn't have liked Mars anyhow, he thought, and rose to his feet.

Carrying the box he strode swiftly toward the emergency hatch. Before the stewardess could reach him he had thrown open the hatch. He stepped forward and the hatch locked behind him. For an instant he was within the cramped unit, and then he began to twist open the heavy outer door.

"Mr. Biskle!" the stewardess's voice came, muffled by the door behind him. He heard her fumbling to reach him, opening the door and groping to catch hold of him.

As he twisted open the outer door the kitten within the box under his arm snarled.

You, too? Milt Biskle thought, and paused.

Death, the emptiness and utter lack of warmth of 'tween space, seeped around him, filtering past the partly opened outer door. He smelled it and something within him, as in the kitten, retreated by instinct. He paused, holding the box, not trying to push the outer door any farther open, and in that moment the stewardess grabbed him.

"Mr. Biskle," she said with a half-sob, "are you out of your mind? Good God, what are you doing?" She managed to tug the outer door shut, screw the emergency section back into shut position.

"You know exactly what I'm doing," Milt Biskle said as he allowed her to propel him back into the ship and to his seat. And don't think you stopped me, he said to himself. Because it wasn't you. I could have gone ahead and done it. But I decided not to.

He wondered why.

Later, at Field Three on Mars, Dr. DeWinter met him as he had expected.

The two of them walked to the parked ‘copter and DeWinter in a worried tone of voice said, “I’ve just been informed that during the trip —”

“That’s right. I attempted suicide. But I changed my mind. Maybe you know why. You’re the psychologist, the authority as to what goes on inside us.” He entered the ‘copter, being careful not to bang the box containing the Terran kitten.

“You’re going to go ahead and stake your landparcel with Fay?” Dr. DeWinter asked presently as the ‘copter flew above green, wet fields of high protein wheat. “Even though — you know?”

“Yes.” He nodded. After all, there was nothing else for him, as far as he could make out.

“You Terrans.” DeWinter shook his head. “Admirable.” Now he noticed the box on Milt Biskle’s lap. “What’s that you have there? A creature from Terra?” He eyed it suspiciously; obviously to him it was a manifestation of an alien form of life. “A rather peculiar-looking organism.”

“It’s going to keep me company,” Milt Biskle said. “While I go on with my work, either building up my private parcel or —” Or helping you Proxmen with Terra, he thought.

“Is that what was called a ‘rattlesnake’? I detect the sound of its rattles.” Dr. DeWinter edged away.

“It’s purring.” Milt Biskle stroked the kitten as the autonomic circuit of the ‘copter guided it across the dully red Martian sky. Contact with the one familiar life-form, he realized, will keep me sane. It will make it possible for me to go on. He felt grateful. My race may have been defeated and destroyed, but not all Terran creatures have perished. When we reconstruct

Terra maybe we can induce the authorities to allow us to set up game preserves. We'll make that part of our task, he told himself, and again he patted the kitten. At least we can hope for that much.

Next to him, Dr. DeWinter was also deep in thought. He appreciated the intricate workmanship, by engineers stationed on the third planet, which had gone into the simulacrum resting in the box on Milt Biskle's lap. The technical achievement was impressive, even to him, and he saw clearly — as Milt Biskle of course did not. This artifact, accepted by the Terran as an authentic organism from his familiar past, would provide a pivot by which the man would hang onto his psychic balance.

But what about the other reconstruct engineers? What would carry each of them through and past the moment of discovery as each completed his work and had to — whether he liked it or not — awake?

It would vary from Terran to Terran. A dog for one, a more elaborate simulacrum, possibly that of a nubile human female, for another. In any case each would be provided with an "exception" to the true state. One essential surviving entity, selected out of what had in fact totally vanished. Research into the past of each engineer would provide the clue, as it had in Biskle's instance; the cat-simulacrum had been finished weeks before his abrupt, panic-stricken trip home to Terra. For instance, in Andre's case a parrot-simulacrum was already under construction. It would be done by the time he made *his* trip home.

"I call him Thunder," Milt Biskle explained.

"Good name," Dr. DeWinter — as he titled himself these days — said. And thought, A shame we could not have shown him the real situation of Terra. Actually it's quite interesting that he accepted what he saw, because on some level he must realize that nothing survives a war of the kind we conducted. Obviously he desperately wanted to believe that a remnant, even though no more than rubble, endures. But it's typical of the Terran mind to

fasten onto phantoms. That might help explain their defeat in the conflict; they were simply not realists.

"This cat," Milt Biskle said, "is going to be a mighty hunter of Martian sneak-mice."

"Right," Dr. DeWinter agreed, and thought, *As long as its batteries don't run down.* He, too, patted the kitten.

A switch closed and the kitten purred louder.

Retreat Syndrome

Peace Officer Caleb Myers picked up the fast-moving surface vehicle on his radarscope, saw at once that its operator had managed to remove the governor; the vehicle, at one-sixty miles per hour, had exceeded its legal capacity. Hence, he knew, the operator came from the Blue Class, engineers and technicians capable of tinkering with their wheels. Arrest, therefore, would be a tricky matter.

By radio Myers contacted a police vessel ten miles north along the freeway. “Shoot its power supply out as it passes you,” he suggested to his brother officer. “It’s going too fast to block, right?”

At 3:10 A.M. the vehicle was stopped; powerless, it had coasted to a halt on the freeway shoulder. Officer Myers pressed buttons, flew leisurely north until he spotted the helpless wheel, plus the red-lit police wheel making its way through heavy traffic toward it. He landed at the exact instant that his compatriot arrived on the scene.

Together, warily, they walked to the stalled wheel, gravel crunching under their boots.

In the wheel sat a slim man wearing a white shirt and tie; he stared straight ahead with a dazed expression, making no move to greet the two gray-clad officers with their laser rifles, anti-pellet bubbles protecting their bodies from thigh to cranium. Myers opened the door of the wheel and glanced in, while his fellow officer stood with rifle in hand, just in case this was another come-on; five men from the local office, San Francisco, had been killed this week alone.

“You know,” Myers said to the silent driver, “that it’s a mandatory two-year suspension of license if you tamper with your wheel’s speed governor.

Was it worth it?”

After a pause the driver turned his head and said, “I’m sick.”

“Psychically? Or physically?” Myers touched the emergency button at his throat, making contact with line 3, to San Francisco General Hospital; he could have an ambulance here in five minutes, if necessary.

The driver said huskily, “Everything seemed unreal to me. I thought if I drove fast enough I could reach some place where it’s — solid.” He put his hand gropingly against the dashboard of his wheel, as if not really believing the heavily-padded surface was there.

“Let me look in your throat, sir,” Myers said, and shone his flashlight in the driver’s face. He turned the jaw upward, peered down past well-cared-for teeth as the man reflexively opened his mouth.

“See it?” his fellow officer asked.

“Yes.” He had caught the glint. The anti-carcinoma unit, installed in the throat; like most nonTerrans this man was cancer phobic. Probably he had spent most of his life in a colony world, breathing pure air, the artificial atmosphere installed by autonomic reconstruct equipment prior to human habitation. So the phobia was easy to understand.

“I have a full-time doctor.” The driver reached now into his pocket, brought out his wallet; from it he extracted a card. His hand shook as he passed the card to Myers. “Specialist in psychosomatic medicine, in San Jose. Any way you could take me there?”

“You’re not sick,” Myers said. “You just haven’t fully adjusted to Earth, to this gravity and atmosphere and milieu factors. It’s three-fifteen in the morning; this doctor — Hagopian or whatever his name is — can’t see you now.” He studied the card. It informed him:

This man is under medical care and should any bizarre behavior be exhibited obtain medical help at once.

"Earth doctors," his fellow officer said, "don't see patients after hours; you'll have to learn that, Mr. —" He held out his hand. "Let me see your operator's license, please."

The entire wallet was reflexively passed to him.

"Go home," Myers said to the man. His name, according to the license, was John Cupertino. "You have a wife? Maybe she can pick you up; we'll take you into the city… better leave your wheel here and not try to drive any more tonight. About your speed —"

Cupertino said, "I'm not used to an arbitrary maximum. Ganymede has no traffic problem; we travel in the two and two-fifties." His voice had an oddly flat quality. Myers thought at once of drugs, in particular of thalamic stimulants; Cupertino was hag-ridden with impatience. That might explain his removal of the official speed regulator, a rather easy removal job for a man accustomed to machinery. And yet —

There was more. From twenty years' experience Myers intuited it.

Reaching out he opened the glove compartment, flashed his light in. Letters, an AAA book of approved motels…

"You don't really believe you're on Earth, do you, Mr. Cupertino?" Myers said. He studied the man's face; it was devoid of affect. "You're another one of those bippity-bop addicts who thinks this is a drug-induced guilt-fantasy… and you're really home on Ganymede, sitting in the living room of your twenty-room demesne — surrounded no doubt by your autonomic servants, right?" He laughed sharply, then turned to his fellow officer. "It grows wild on Ganymede," he explained. "The stuff. Frohedadrine, the extract's called. They grind up the dried stalks, make a mash of it, boil it, drain it, filter it, and then roll it up and smoke it. And when they're all done —"

“I’ve never taken Frohedadrine,” John Cupertino said remotely; he stared straight ahead. “I know I’m on Earth. But there’s something wrong with me. Look.” Reaching out, he put his hand through the heavily-padded dashboard; Officer Myers saw the hand disappear up to the wrist. “You see? It’s all insubstantial around me, like shadows. Both of you; I can banish you by just removing my attention from you. I think I can, anyhow. But — *I don’t want to*!” His voice grated with anguish. “I want you to be real; I want all of this to be real, including Dr. Hagopian.”

Officer Myers switched his throat-transmitter to line 2 and said, “Put me through to a Dr. Hagopian in San Jose. This is an emergency; never mind his answering service.”

The line clicked as the circuit was established.

Glancing at his fellow officer Myers said, “You saw it. You saw him put his hand through the dashboard. Maybe he can banish us.” He did not particularly feel like testing it out; he felt confused and he wished now that he had let Cupertino speed on along the freeway, to oblivion if necessary. To wherever he wanted.

“I know why all this is,” Cupertino said, half to himself. He got out cigarettes, lit up; his hand was less shaky now. “It’s because of the death of Carol, my wife.”

Neither officer contradicted him; they kept quiet and waited for the call to Dr. Hagopian to be put through.

His trousers on over his pajamas, and wearing a jacket buttoned to keep him warm in the night chill, Gottlieb Hagopian met his patient Mr. Cupertino at his otherwise closed-up office in downtown San Jose. Dr. Hagopian switched on lights, then the heat, arranged a chair, wondered how he looked to his patient with his hair sticking in all directions.

“Sorry to get you up,” Cupertino said, but he did not sound sorry; he seemed perfectly wide-awake, here at four in the morning. He sat smoking with his legs crossed, and Dr. Hagopian, cursing and groaning to himself in futile complaint, went to the back room to plug in the coffeemaker: at least he could have that.

“The police officers,” Hagopian said, “thought you might have taken some stimulants, by your behavior. We know better.” Cupertino was, as he well knew, always this way; the man was slightly manic.

“I never should have killed Carol,” Cupertino said. “It’s never been the same since then.”

“You miss her right now? Yesterday when you saw me you said —”

“That was in broad daylight; I always feel confident when the sun’s up. By the way — I’ve retained an attorney. Name’s Phil Wolfson.”

“Why?” No litigation was pending against Cupertino; they both knew that.

“I need professional advice. In addition to yours. I’m not criticizing you, doctor; don’t take it as an insult. But there’re aspects to my situation which are more legal than medical. Conscience is an interesting phenomenon; it lies partly in the psychological realm, partly —”

“Coffee?”

“Lord no. It sets the vagus nerve off for four hours.”

Dr. Hagopian said, “Did you tell the police officers about Carol? About your killing her?”

“I just said that she was dead; I was careful.”

“You weren’t careful when you drove at one-sixty. There was a case in the *Chronicle* today — it happened on the Bayshore Freeway — where the State Highway Patrol went ahead and disintegrated a car that was going one-fifty; and it was legal. Public safety, the lives of —”

“They warned it,” Cupertino pointed out. He did not seem perturbed; in fact he had become even more tranquil. “It refused to stop. A drunk.”

Dr. Hagopian said, “You realize, of course, that Carol is still alive. That in fact she’s living here on Earth, in Los Angeles.”

“Of course.” Cupertino nodded irritably. Why did Hagopian have to belabor the obvious? They had discussed it countless times, and no doubt the psychiatrist was going to ask him the old query once again: how could you have killed her when you know she’s alive? He felt weary and irritable; the session with Hagopian was getting him nowhere.

Taking a pad of paper Dr. Hagopian wrote swiftly, then tore off the sheet and held it toward Cupertino.

“A prescription?” Cupertino accepted it warily.

“No. An address.”

Glancing at it Cupertino saw that it was an address in South Pasadena. No doubt it was Carol’s address; he glared at it in wrath.

“I’m going to try this,” Dr. Hagopian said. “I want you to go there and see her face to face. Then we’ll —”

“Tell the board of directors of Six-planet Educational Enterprises to see her, not me,” Cupertino said, handing the piece of paper back. “They’re responsible for the entire tragedy; because of them I had to do it. And you

know that, so don’t look at me that way. It was their plan that had to be kept secret; isn’t that so?”

Dr. Hagopian sighed. “At four in the morning everything seems confused. The whole world seems ominous. I’m aware that you were employed by Six-planet at the time, on Ganymede. But the moral responsibility —” He broke off. “This is difficult to say, Mr. Cupertino. You pulled the trigger on the laser beam, so you have to take final moral responsibility.”

“Carol was going to tell the local homeopapes that there was about to be an uprising to free Ganymede, and the bourgeois authority on Ganymede, consisting in the main of Six-planet, was involved; I told her that we couldn’t afford to have her say anything. She did it for petty, spiteful motives, for hatred of me; nothing to do with the actual issues involved. Like all women she was motivated by personal vanity and wounded pride.”

“Go to that address in South Pasadena,” Dr. Hagopian urged. “See Carol. Convince yourself that you never killed her, that what happened on Ganymede that day three years ago was a —” He gestured, trying to find the right words.

“Yes, doctor,” Cupertino said cuttingly. “Just what was it? Because that day — or rather that night — I got Carol right above the eyes with that laser beam, right in the frontal lobe; she was absolutely unmistakably dead before I left the conapt and got out of there, got to the spaceport and found an interplan ship to take me to Earth.” He waited; it was going to be hard on Hagopian, finding the right words; it would take quite some time.

After a pause, Hagopian admitted, “Yes, your memory is detailed; it’s all in my file and I see no use in your repeating it — I frankly find it unpleasant at this hour of the morning. *I* don’t know why the memory is there; I know it’s false because I’ve met your wife, talked to her, carried on a correspondence with her; all subsequent to the date, on Ganymede, at which you remember killing her. I know that much, at least.”

Cupertino said, “Give me one good reason for looking her up.” He made a motion to tear the slip of paper in half.

“One?” Dr. Hagopian pondered. He looked gray and tired. “Yes, I can give you a good reason, but probably it’s one you’ll reject.”

“Try me.”

Dr. Hagopian said, “Carol was present that night on Ganymede, the night you recall killing her. Maybe she can tell you how you obtained the false memory; she implied in correspondence with me that she knows something about it.” He eyed Cupertino. “That’s all she would tell me.”

“I’ll go,” Cupertino said. And walked swiftly to the door of Dr. Hagopian’s office. Strange, he thought, to obtain knowledge about a person’s death from that person. But Hagopian was right; Carol was the only other person who was present that night… he should have realized long ago that eventually he’d have to look her up.

It was a crisis in his logic that he did not enjoy facing.

At six in the morning he stood at Carol Holt Cupertino’s door. Many rings of the bell were required until at last the door of the small, single-unit dwelling opened; Carol, wearing a blue, pellucid nylon nightgown and white furry slippers, stood sleepily facing him. A cat hurried out past her.

“Remember me?” Cupertino said, stepping aside for the cat.

“Oh God.” She brushed the tumble of blonde hair back from her eyes, nodded. “What time is it?” Gray, cold light filled the almost deserted street; Carol shivered, folded her arms. “How come you’re up so early? You never used to be out of bed before eight.”

“I haven’t gone to bed yet.” He stepped past her, entered the dark living room with its drawn shades. “How about some coffee?”

“Sure.” Listlessly she made her way to the kitchen, pressed the HOT COFFEE button on the stove; first one, then a second cup appeared, giving off fragrant steam. “Cream for me,” she said, “cream and sugar for you. You’re more infantile.” She handed him his cup; the smell of her — warmth and softness and sleep — mixed with that of the coffee.

Cupertino said, “You haven’t gotten a day older and it’s been well over three years.” In fact she was even more slender, more supple.

Seating herself at the kitchen table, her arms still modestly folded, Carol said, “Is that suspicious?” Her cheeks were flushed, her eyes bright.

“No. A compliment.” He, too, seated himself. “Hagopian sent me here; he decided I should see you. Evidently —”

“Yes,” Carol said, “I’ve seen him. I was in Northern California several times on business; I stopped by… he had asked me to in a letter. I like him. In fact you should be about cured by now.”

” ‘Cured’?” He shrugged. “I feel I am. Except —”

“Except that you still have your *idée fixe*. Your basic, delusional, fixed idea that no amount of psychoanalysis will help. Right?”

Cupertino said, “If you mean my recollection of killing you, yes; I still have it — *I know it happened*. Dr. Hagopian thought you could tell me something about it; after all, as he pointed out —”

“Yes,” she agreed, “but is it really worth going over this with you? It’s so tedious, and my God, it’s only six A.M. Couldn’t I go back to bed and then sometime later get together with you, maybe in the evening? No?” she sighed. “Okay. Well, you tried to kill me. You did have a laser beam. It was at our conapt in New Detroit-G, on Ganymede, on March 12, 2014.”

“Why did I try to kill you?”

“You know.” Her tone was bitter; her breasts pulsed with resentment.

“Yes.” In all his thirty-five years he had never made another mistake as serious. In their divorce litigation his wife’s knowledge of the impending revolt had given her the dominant position; she had been able to dictate settlement terms to him precisely as she wished. At last the financial components had proved unbearable and he had gone to the conapt which they had shared — by then he had moved out, gotten a small conapt of his own at the other end of the city — and had told her simply and truthfully that he could not meet her demands. And so the threat by Carol to go to the homeopapes, the news-gathering extensors of the New York *Times* and *Daily News* which operated on Ganymede.

“You got out your little laser beam,” Carol was saying, “and you sat with it, fooling with it, not saying much. But you got your message over to me; either I accepted an unfair settlement which —”

“Did I fire the beam?”

“Yes.”

“And it hit you?”

Carol said, “You missed and I ran out of the conapt and down the hall to the elevator. I got downstairs to the sergeant at arms’ room on floor one and called the police from there. They came. They found you still in the conapt.” Her tone was withering. “You were crying.”

“Christ,” Cupertino said. Neither of them spoke for a time, then; they both drank their coffee. Across from him his wife’s pale hand shook and her cup clinked against its saucer.

“Naturally,” Carol said matter of factly, “I went ahead with the divorce litigation. Under the circumstances —”

“Dr. Hagopian thought you might know why I remember killing you that night. He said you hinted at it in a letter.”

Her blue eyes glittered. “*That night you had no false memory;* you knew you had failed. Amboynton, the district attorney, gave you a choice between accepting mandatory psychiatric help or having formal charges filed of attempted first-degree murder; you took the former — naturally — and so you’ve been seeing Dr. Hagopian. The false memory — I can tell you exactly when that set in. You visited your employer, Six-planet Educational Enterprises; you saw their psychologist, a Dr. Edgar Green, attached to their personnel department. That was shortly before you left Ganymede and came here to Terra.” Rising she went to fill her cup; it was empty. “I presume Dr. Green saw to the implanting of the false memory of your having killed me.”

Cupertino said, “But why?”

“They knew you had told me of the plans for the uprising. You were supposed to commit suicide from remorse and grief, but instead you booked passage to Terra, as you had agreed with Amboynton. As a matter of fact you did attempt suicide during the trip… but you must remember this.”

“Go on and say it.” He had no memory of a suicide attempt.

“I’ll show you the clipping from the homeopape; naturally I kept it.” Carol left the kitchen; her voice came from the bedroom. “Out of misguided sentimentality. ‘Passenger on interplan ship seized as —’ ” Her voice broke off and there was silence.

Sipping his coffee Cupertino sat waiting, knowing that she would find no such newspaper clipping. Because there had been no such attempt.

Carol returned to the kitchen, a puzzled expression on her face. “I can’t locate it. But I know it was in my copy of *War and Peace*, in volume one; I was using it as a bookmark.” She looked embarrassed.

Cupertino said, “I’m not the only one who has a false memory. If that’s what it is.” He felt, for the first time in over three years, that he was at last making progress.

But the direction of that progress was obscured. At least so far. “I don’t understand,” Carol said. “Something’s wrong.”

While he waited in the kitchen, Carol, in the bedroom, dressed. At last she emerged, wearing a green sweater, skirt, heels; combing her hair she halted at the stove and pressed the buttons for toast and two soft-boiled eggs. It was now almost seven; the light in the street outside was no longer gray but a faint gold. And more traffic moved; he heard the reassuring sound of commercial vehicles and private commute wheels.

“How did you manage to snare this single-unit dwelling?” he asked. “Isn’t it as impossible in the Los Angeles area as in the Bay area to get anything but a conapt in a high-rise?”

“Through my employers.”

“Who’re your employers?” He felt at once cautious and disturbed; obviously they had influence. His wife had gone up in the world.

“Falling Star Associates.”

He had never heard of them; puzzled, he said, “Do they operate beyond Terra?” Surely if they were interplan —

“It’s a holding company. I’m a consultant to the chairman of the board; I do marketing research.” She added, “Your old employer, Six-planet Educational Enterprises, belongs to us; we own controlling stock. Not that it matters. It’s just a coincidence.”

She ate breakfast, offering him nothing; evidently it did not even occur to her to. Moodily he watched the familiar dainty movements of her cutlery. She was still ennobled by petite bourgeois gentility; that had not changed. In fact she was more refined, more feminine, than ever.

"I think," Cupertino said, "that I understand this."

"Pardon?" She glanced up, her blue eyes fixed on him intently. "Understand what, Johnny?"

Cupertino said, "About you. Your presence. You're obviously quite real — as real as everything else. As real as the city of Pasadena, as this table —" He rapped with brusque force on the plastic surface of the kitchen table. "As real as Dr. Hagopian or the two police who stopped me earlier this morning." He added, *"But how real is that? I think we have the central question there.* It would explain my sensation of passing my hands through matter, through the dashboard of my wheel, as I did. That very unpleasant sensation that nothing around me was substantial, that I inhabited a world of shadows." Staring at him Carol suddenly laughed. Then continued eating. "Possibly," Cupertino said, "I'm in a prison on Ganymede, or in a psychiatric hospital there. Because of my criminal act. And I've begun, during these last years since your death, to inhabit a fantasy world."

"Oh God," Carol said and shook her head. "I don't know whether to laugh or feel sorry; it's just too —" She gestured. "Too pathetic. I really feel sorry for you, Johnny. Rather than give up your delusional idea you'd actually prefer to believe that all Terra is a product of your mind, everyone and everything. Listen — don't you agree it'd be more economical to give up the fixed idea? Just abandon the one idea that you killed me —" The phone rang.

"Pardon me." Carol hastily wiped her mouth, rose to go and answer it. Cupertino remained where he was, gloomily playing with a flake of toast which had fallen from her plate; the butter on it stained his finger and he licked it away, reflexively, then realized that he was gnawingly hungry; it

was time for his own breakfast and he went to the stove to press buttons for himself, in Carol's absence. Presently he had his own meal, bacon and scrambled eggs, toast and hot coffee, before him.

But how can I live? he asked himself. — *Gain substance, if this is a delusional world?*

I must be eating a genuine meal, he decided. *Provided by the hospital or prison; a meal exists and I am actually consuming it -- a room exists, walls and a floor… but not this room. Not these walls nor this floor.*

And - - people exist. But not this woman. Not Carol Holt Cupertino. Someone else. An impersonal jailer or attendant. And a doctor. Perhaps, he decided, *Dr. Hagopian.*

That much is so, Cupertino said to himself. *Dr. Hagopian is really my psychiatrist.*

Carol returned to the kitchen, reseated herself at her now cold plate. "You talk to him. It's Hagopian."

At once he went to the phone.

On the small vidscreen Dr. Hagopian's image looked taut and drawn. "I see you got there, John. Well? What took place?"

Cupertino said, "Where are we, Hagopian?"

Frowning, the psychiatrist said, "I don't - "

"We're both on Ganymede, aren't we?"

Hagopian said, "I'm in San Jose; you're in Los Angeles."

“I think I know how to test my theory,” Cupertino said. “I’m going to discontinue treatment with you; if I’m a prisoner on Ganymede I won’t be able to, but if I’m a free citizen on Terra as you maintain —”

“You’re on Terra,” Hagopian said, “but you’re not a free citizen. Because of your attempt on your wife’s life you’re *obliged* to accept regular psychotherapy through me. You know that. What did Carol tell you? Could she shed any light on the events of that night?”

“I would say so,” Cupertino said. “I learned that she’s employed by the parent company of Six-planet Educational Enterprises; that alone makes my trip down here worthwhile. I must have found out about her, that she was employed by Six-planet to ride herd over me.”

“P-pardon?” Hagopian blinked.

“A watchdog. To see that I remained loyal; they must have feared I was going to leak details of the planned uprising to the Terran authorities. So they assigned Carol to watch me. I told her the plans and to them that proved I was unreliable. So Carol probably received instructions to kill me; she probably made an attempt and failed, and everyone connected with it was punished by the Terran authorities. Carol escaped because she wasn’t officially listed as an employee of Six-planet.”

“Wait,” Dr. Hagopian said. “It does sound somewhat plausible. But —” He raised his hand. “Mr. Cupertino, the uprising was successful; it’s a matter of historic fact. Three years ago Ganymede, Io and Callisto simultaneously threw off Terra and became self-governing, independent moons. Every child in school beyond the third grade knows that; it was the so-called Tri-Lunar War of 2014. You and I have never discussed it but I assumed you were aware of it as —” He gestured. “Well, as any other historic reality.”

Turning from the telephone to Carol, John Cupertino said, “Is that so?”

“Of course,” Carol said. “Is that part of your delusional system, too, that your little revolt failed?” She smiled. “You worked eight years for it, for one of the major economic cartels masterminding and financing it, and then for some occult reason you choose to ignore its success. I really pity you, Johnny; it’s too bad.”

“There must be a reason,” Cupertino said. “Why I don’t know that. Why they decided to keep me from knowing that.” Bewildered, he reached out his hand…

His hand, trembling, passed into the vidphone screen and disappeared. He drew it back at once; his hand reappeared. But he had seen it go. He had perceived and understood.

The illusion was good — but not quite good enough. It simply was not perfect; it had its limitations.

“Dr. Hagopian,” he said to the miniature image on the vidscreen, “I don’t think I’ll continue seeing you. As of this morning you’re fired. Bill me at my home, and thank you very much.” He reached to cut the connection.

“You can’t,” Hagopian said instantly. “As I said, it’s mandatory. You must face it, Cupertino; otherwise you’ll have to go up before the court once more, and I know you don’t want to do that. Please believe me; it would be bad for you.”

Cupertino cut the connection and the screen died.

“He’s right, you know,” Carol said, from the kitchen.

“He’s lying,” Cupertino said. And, slowly, walked back to seat himself across from her and resume eating his own breakfast.

When he returned to his own conapt in Berkeley he put in a long distance vidcall to Dr Edgar Green at Six-planet Educational Enterprises on Ganymede. Within half an hour he had his party.

"Do you remember me, Dr. Green?" he asked as he faced the image. To him the rather plump, middle-aged face opposite him was unfamiliar; he did not believe he had ever seen the man before in his life. However, at least one fundamental reality-configuration had borne the test: there was a Dr. Edgar Green in Six-planet's personnel department; Carol had been telling the truth to that extent.

"I have seen you before," Dr. Green said, "but I'm sorry to say that the name does not come to mind, sir."

"John Cupertino. Now of Terra. Formerly of Ganymede. I was involved in a rather sensational piece of litigation slightly over three years ago, somewhat before Ganymede's revolt. I was accused of murdering my wife, Carol. Does that help you, doctor?"

"Hmm," Dr. Green said, frowning. He raised an eyebrow. "Were you acquitted, Mr. Cupertino?"

Hesitating, Cupertino said, "I — currently am under psychiatric care, here in the Bay area of California. If that's any help."

"I presume you're saying that you were declared legally insane. And therefore could not stand trail."

Cupertino, cautiously, nodded.

"It may be," Dr. Green said, "that I talked to you. Very dimly it rings a bell. But I see so many people… were you employed here?"

"Yes," Cupertino said.

“What specifically, did you want from me, Mr. Cupertino? Obviously you want something; you’ve placed a rather expensive long distance call. I suggest for practical purposes — your pocketbook in particular — you get to the point.”

“I’d like you to forward my case history,” Cupertino said. “To me, not to my psychiatrist. Can that be arranged?”

“You want it for what purpose, Mr. Cupertino? For securing employment?”

Cupertino, taking a deep breath, said, “No, doctor. So that I can be absolutely certain what psychiatric techniques were used in my case. By you and by members of your medical staff, those working under you. I have reason to believe I underwent major corrective therapy with you. Am I entitled to know that, doctor? It would seem to me that I am.” He waited, thinking, *I have about one chance in a thousand of prying anything of worth out of this man.* But it was worth the try.

” ‘Corrective therapy’? You must be confused, Mr. Cupertino; we do only aptitude testing, profile analysis — we don’t do therapy, here. Our concern is merely to analyze the job-applicant in order to —”

“Dr. Green,” Cupertino said, “were you personally involved in the revolt of three years ago?”

Green shrugged. “We all were. Everyone on Ganymede was filled with patriotism.” His voice was bland.

“To protect that revolt,” Cupertino said, “would you have implanted a delusional idea in my mind for the purpose of —”

“I’m sorry,” Green interrupted. “It’s obvious that you’re psychotic. There’s no point in wasting your money on this call; I’m surprised that they permitted you access to an outside vidline.”

“But such a idea can be implanted,” Cupertino persisted. “It is possible, by current psychiatric technique. You admit that.”

Dr. Green sighed. “Yes, Mr. Cupertino. It’s been possible ever since the mid-twentieth century; such techniques were initially developed by the Pavlov Institute in Moscow as early as 1940, perfected by the time of the Korean War. A man can be made to believe anything.”

“Then Carol could be right.” He did not know if he was disappointed or elated. It would mean, he realized, that he was not a murderer; that was the cardinal point. Carol *was* alive, and his experience with Terra, with its people, cities and objects, was genuine. And yet — “If I came to Ganymede,” he said suddenly, “*could I see my file?* Obviously if I’m well enough to make the trip I’m not a psychotic under mandatory psychiatric care. I may be sick, doctor, but I’m not that sick.” He waited; it was a slim chance, but worth trying.

“Well,” Dr. Green said, pondering, “there is no company rule which precludes an employee — or ex-employee — examining his personnel file; I suppose I could open it to you. However, I’d prefer to check with your psychiatrist first. Would you give me his name, please? And if he agrees I’ll save you a trip; I’ll have it put on the vidwires and in your hands by tonight, your time.”

He gave Dr. Green the name of his psychiatrist, Dr. Hagopian. And then hung up. What would Hagopian say? An interesting question and one he could not answer; he had no idea which way Hagopian would jump.

But by nightfall he would know; that much was certain.

He had an intuition that Hagopian would agree. But for the wrong reasons.

However, that did not matter; Hagopian’s motives were not important — all that he cared about was the file. Getting his hands on it, reading it and

finding out if Carol was right.

It was two hours later — actually an incredibly long time — that it came to him, all at once, that Six-planet Educational Enterprises could, with no difficulty whatsoever, tamper with the file, omit the pertinent information. Transmit to Earth a spurious, worthless document.

Then what did he do next?

It was a good question. And one — for the moment — which he could not answer.

That evening the file from Six-planet Educational Enterprises' main personnel offices on Ganymede was delivered by Western Union Messenger to his conapt. He tipped the messenger, seated himself in his living room and opened the file.

It took him only a few moments to certify the fact which he had suspected: the file contained no references to any implantation of a delusional idea. Either the file had been reconstructed or Carol was mistaken. Mistaken — or lying. In any case the file told him nothing.

He phoned the University of California, and, after being switched from station to station, wound up with someone who seemed to know what he was talking about. "I want an analysis," Cupertino explained, "of a written document. To find out how recently it was transcribed. This is a Western Union wire-copy so you'll have to go on word anachronisms alone. I want to find out if the material was developed three years ago or more recently. Do you think you can analyze for so slight a factor?"

"There's been very little word-change in the past three years," the university philologist said. "But we can try. How soon do you have to have the document back?"

"As soon as possible," Cupertino said.

He called for a building messenger to take the file to the university, and then he took time to ponder another element in the situation.

If his experience of Terra was delusional, the moment at which his perceptions most closely approximated reality occurred during his sessions with Dr. Hagopian. Hence if he were ever to break through the delusional system and perceive actual reality it would most likely take place then; his maximum efforts should be directed at that time. Because one fact seemed clearly established: he really was seeing Dr. Hagopian.

He went to the phone and started to dial Hagopian's number. Last night, after the arrest, Hagopian had helped him; it was unusually soon to be seeing the doctor again, but he dialed. In view of his analysis of the situation it seemed justified; he could afford the cost… And then something came to him.

The arrest. All at once he remembered what the policeman had said; he had accused Cupertino of being a user of the Ganymedean drug Frohedadrine. And for a good reason: *he showed the symptoms.*

Perhaps that was the modus operandi by which the delusional system was maintained; he was being given Frohedadrine in small regular doses, perhaps in his food.

But wasn't that a paranoid — in other words psychotic — concept?

And yet paranoid or not, it made sense.

What he needed was a blood fraction test. The presence of the drug would register in such a test; all he had to do was show up at the clinic of his firm in Oakland, ask for the test on the grounds that he had a suspected toxemia. And within an hour the test would be completed.

And, if he was on Frohedadrine, it would prove that he was correct; he was still on Ganymede, not on Terra. And all that he experienced — or seemed to experience — a delusion, with the possible exception of his regular, mandatory visits to the psychiatrist.

Obviously he should have the blood fraction test made — at once. And yet he shrank from it. Why? Now he had the means by which to make a possible absolute analysis, and yet he held back.

Did he want to know the truth?

Certainly he had to have the test made; he forgot temporarily the notion of seeing Dr. Hagopian, went to the bathroom to shave, then put on a clean shirt and tie and left the conapt, starting toward his parked wheel; in fifteen minutes he would be at his employer's clinic.

His employer. He halted, his hand touching the doorhandle of his wheel, feeling foolish.

They had slipped up somehow in their presentation of his delusional system. Because he did not know where he worked. A major segment of the system simply was not there.

Returning to his conapt he dialed Dr. Hagopian.

Rather sourly Dr. Hagopian said, "Good evening, John. I see you're back in your own conapt; you didn't stay in Los Angeles long."

Cupertino said huskily, "Doctor, I don't know where I work. Obviously something's gone wrong; I must have known formerly — up until today, in fact. Haven't I been going to work four days a week like everyone else?"

"Of course," Hagopian said, unruffled. "You're employed by an Oakland firm, Triplan Industries, Incorporated, on San Pablo Avenue near Twenty-first Street. Look up the exact address in your phone book. But —

I’d say go to bed and rest; you were up all last night and it seems obvious that you’re suffering a fatigue reaction.”

“Suppose,” Cupertino said, “greater and greater sections of the delusional system begin to slip. It won’t be very pleasant for me.” The one missing element terrified him; it was as if a piece of himself had dissolved. Not to know where he worked — in an instant he was set apart from all other humans, thoroughly isolated. And how much else could he forget? Perhaps it was the fatigue; Hagopian might be right. He was, after all, too old to stay up all night; it was not as it had been a decade ago when such things were physically possible for both him and Carol.

He wanted, he realized, to hang onto the delusional system; he did not wish to see it decompose around him. A person was his world; without it he did not exist.

“Doctor,” he said, “may I see you this evening?”

“But you just saw me,” Dr. Hagopian pointed out. “There’s no reason for another appointment so soon. Wait until later in the week. And in the meantime —”

“I think I understand how the delusional system is maintained,” Cupertino said. “Through daily doses of Frohedadrine, administered orally, in my food. Perhaps by going to Los Angeles I missed a dose; that might explain why a segment of the system collapsed. Or else as you say it’s fatigue; in any case this proves that I’m correct: this is a delusional system, and I don’t need either the blood fraction test or the University of California to confirm it. Carol is dead — *and you know it.* You’re my psychiatrist on Ganymede and I’m in custody, have been now for three years. Isn’t that actually the case?” He waited, but Hagopian did not answer; the doctor’s face remained impassive. “I never was in Los Angeles,” Cupertino said. “In fact I’m probably confined to a relatively small area; I have no freedom of motion as it would appear. And I didn’t see Carol this morning, did I?”

Hagopian said slowly, “What do you mean, ‘blood fraction test’? What gave you the idea of asking for that?” He smiled faintly. “If this is a delusional system, John, the blood fraction test would be illusory, too. So how could it help you?”

He had not thought of that; stunned, he remained silent, unable to answer.

“And that file which you asked Dr. Green for,” Hagopian said. “Which you received and then transferred to the University of California for analysis; that would be delusional, too. So how can the result of their tests —”

Cupertino said, “There’s no way you could know of that, doctor. You conceivably might know that I talked to Dr. Green, asked for and received the file; Green might have talked to you. But not my request for analysis by the university; you couldn’t possibly know that. I’m sorry, doctor, but by a contradiction of internal logic this structure has proved itself unreal. You know too much about me. And I think I know what final, absolute test I can apply to confirm my reasoning.”

“What test?” Hagopian’s tone was cold.

Cupertino said, “Go back to Los Angeles. And kill Carol once more.”

“Good God, how —”

“A woman who has been dead for three years can’t die again,” Cupertino said. “Obviously it’ll prove impossible to kill her.” He started to break the phone connection.

“Wait,” Hagopian said rapidly. “Look, Cupertino; I’ve got to contact the police now — you’ve forced me to. I can’t let you go down there and murder that woman for the —” He broke off. “Make a second try, I mean, on her life. All right, Cupertino; I’ll admit several things which have been

concealed from you. To an extent you're right; you are on Ganymede, not on Terra."

"I see," Cupertino said, and did not break the circuit.

"But Carol is real," Dr. Hagopian continued. He was perspiring, now; obviously afraid that Cupertino would ring off he said almost stammeringly, "She's as real as you or I. You tried to kill her and failed; she informed the homeopapes about the intended revolt — and because of that the revolt was not completely successful. We here on Ganymede are surrounded by a cordon of Terran military ships; we're cut off from the rest of the Sol System, living on emergency rations and being pushed back, *but still holding out."*

"Why my delusional system?" He felt cold fright rise up inside him; unable to stifle it he felt it enter his chest, invade his heart. "Who imposed it on me?"

"No one imposed it on you. It was a self-induced retreat syndrome due to your sense of guilt. Because, Cupertino, it was your fault that the revolt was detected; your telling Carol was the crucial factor — and you recognize it. You tried suicide and that failed, so instead you withdrew psychologically into this fantasy world."

"If Carol told the Terran authorities she wouldn't now be free to —"

"That's right. Your wife is in prison and that's where you visited her, at our prison in New Detroit-G, here on Ganymede. Frankly, I don't know what the effect of my telling you this will have on your fantasy world; it may cause it to further disintegrate, in fact it may even restore you to a clear perception of the terribly difficult situation which we Ganys face vis-à-vis the Terran military establishment. I've envied you, Cupertino, during these last three years; you haven't had to face the harsh realities we've had to. Now — " He shrugged. "We'll see."

After a pause Cupertino said, “Thanks for telling me.”

“Don’t thank me; I did it to keep you from becoming agitated to the point of violence. You’re my patient and I have to think of your welfare. No punishment for you is now or ever was intended; the extent of your mental illness, your retreat from reality, fully demonstrated your remorse at the results of your stupidity.” Hagopian looked haggard and gray. “In any case leave Carol alone; it’s not your job to exact vengeance. Look it up in the Bible if you don’t believe me. Anyhow she’s being punished, and will continue to be as long as she’s physically in our hands.”

Cupertino broke the circuit.

Do I believe him? he asked himself.

He was not certain. *Carol,* he thought. *So you doomed our cause, out of petty, domestic spite. Out of mere female bitterness, because you were angry at your husband; you doomed an entire moon to three years of losing, hateful war.*

Going to the dresser in his bedroom he got out his laser beam; it had remained hidden there, in a Kleenex box, the entire three years since he had left Ganymede and come to Terra.

But now, he said to himself, *it’s time to use this.*

Going to the phone he dialed for a cab; this time he would travel to Los Angeles by public rocket express, rather than by his own wheel.

He wanted to reach Carol as soon as humanly possible.

You got away from me once, he said as he walked rapidly to the door of his conapt. *But not this time. Not twice.*

Ten minutes later he was aboard the rocket express, on his way to Los Angeles and Carol.

Before John Cupertino lay the Los Angeles *Times;* once more he leafed through it, puzzled, still unable to find the article. Why wasn't it here? he asked himself. A murder committed, an attractive, sexy woman shot to death… he had walked into Carol's place of work, found her at her desk, killed her in front of her fellow employees, then turned and, unhindered, walked back out; everyone had been too frozen with fear and surprise to interfere with him.

And yet it was not in the pape. The homeopape made absolutely no mention of it.

"You're looking in vain," Dr. Hagopian said, from behind his desk.

"It has to be here," Cupertino said doggedly. "A capital crime like that — *what's the matter?"* He pushed the homeopape aside, bewildered. It made no sense; it defied obvious logic.

"First," Dr. Hagopian said wearily, "the laser beam did not exist; that was a delusion. Second, we did not permit you to visit your wife again because we knew you planned violence — you had made that perfectly clear. You never saw her, never killed her, and the homeopape before you is not the Los Angeles *Times;* it's the New Detroit-G *Star*… which is limited to four pages because of the pulp-paper shortage here on Ganymede."

Cupertino stared at him.

"That's right," Dr. Hagopian said, nodding. "It's happened again, John; you have a delusional memory of killing her twice, now. And each event is as unreal as the other. You poor creature — you're evidently doomed to try again and again, and each time fail. As much as our leaders hate Carol Holt Cupertino and deplore and regret what she did to us —" He gestured. "We have to protect her; it's only just. Her sentence is being carried out; she'll be imprisoned for twenty-two more years or until Terra manages to defeat us

and releases her. No doubt if they get hold of her they'll make her into a heroine; she'll be in every Terran-controlled homeopape in the Sol System."

"You'd let them get her alive?" Cupertino said, presently.

"Do you think we should kill her before they take her?" Dr. Hagopian scowled at him. "We're not barbarians, John; we don't commit crimes of vengeance. She's suffered three years of imprisonment already; she's being punished sufficiently." He added, "And so are you as well. I wonder which of you is suffering the more."

"I know I killed her," Cupertino persisted. "I took a cab to her place of employment, Falling Star Associates, which controls Six-planet Educational Enterprises, in San Francisco; her office was on the sixth floor." He remembered the trip up in the elevator, even the hat which the other passenger, a middle-aged woman, had worn. He remembered the slender, red-haired receptionist who had contacted Carol by means of her desk intercom; he remembered passing through the busy inner offices, suddenly finding himself face to face with Carol. She had risen, stood behind her desk, seeing the laser beam which he had brought out; understanding had flashed across her features and she had tried to run, to get away… but he had killed her anyhow, as she reached the far door, her hand clutching for the knob.

"I assure you," Dr. Hagopian said. "Carol is very much alive." He turned to the phone on his desk, dialed. "Here, I'll call her, get her on the line; you can talk to her."

Numbly, Cupertino waited until at last the image on the vidscreen formed. It was Carol.

"Hi," she said, recognizing him.

Haltingly he said, "Hi."

“How are you feeling?” Carol asked.

“Okay.” Awkwardly he said, “And you?”

“I’m fine,” Carol said. “Just a little sleepy because of being woken up so early this morning. By you.”

He rang off, then. “All right,” he said to Dr. Hagopian. “I’m convinced.” It was obviously so; his wife was alive and untouched; in fact she evidently had no knowledge even of an attempt by him on her life this time. He had not even come to her place of business; Hagopian was telling the truth.

Place of business? Her prison cell, rather. If he was to believe Hagopian. And evidently he had to.

Rising, Cupertino said, “Am I free to go? I’d like to get back to my conapt; I’m tired too. I’d like to get some sleep tonight.”

“It’s amazing you’re able to function at all,” Hagopian said, “after having had no sleep for almost fifty hours. By all means go home and go to bed. We’ll talk later.” He smiled encouragingly.

Hunched with fatigue John Cupertino left Dr. Hagopian’s office; he stood outside on the sidewalk, hands in his pockets, shivering in the night cold, and then he got unsteadily into his parked wheel.

“Home,” he instructed it.

The wheel turned smoothly away from the curb, to join traffic.

I could try once more, Cupertino realized suddenly. *Why not? And this time I might be successful. Just because I’ve failed twice - that doesn’t mean I’m doomed always to fail.*

To the wheel he said, “Head toward Los Angeles.”

The autonomic circuit of the wheel clicked as it contacted the main route to Los Angeles, U.S. Highway 99.

She’ll be asleep when I get there, Cupertino realized. *Probably because of that she’ll be confused enough to let me in. And then —*

Perhaps now the revolt will succeed.

There seemed to him to be a gap, a weak point, in his logic. But he could not quite put his finger on it; he was too tired. Leaning back he tried to make himself comfortable against the seat of the wheel; he let the autonomic circuit drive and shut his eyes in an attempt to catch some much-needed sleep. In a few hours he would be in South Pasadena, at Carol’s one-unit dwelling. Perhaps after he killed her he could sleep; he would deserve it, then.

By tomorrow morning, he thought, *if all goes well she’ll be dead.* And then he thought once more about the homeopape, and wondered why there had been no mention of the crime in its columns. *Strange,* he thought. *I wonder why not.* The wheel, at one hundred and sixty miles an hour — after all, he had removed the speed governor — hurtled toward what John Cupertino believed to be Los Angeles and his sleeping wife.

A Tehran Odyssey

Orion Stroud, Chairman of the West Marin school board, turned up the Coleman gasoline lantern so that the utility school room in the white glare became clearly lit, and all four members of the board could make out the new teacher.

"I'll put a few questions to him," Stroud said to the others. "First, this is Mr. Barnes and he comes from Oregon. He tells me he's a specialist in science and natural edibles. Right, Mr. Barnes?"

The new teacher, a short, young-looking man wearing a khaki shirt and work pants, nervously cleared his throat and said, "Yes, I am familiar with chemicals and plants and animal-life, especially whatever is found out in the woods such as berries and mushrooms."

"We've recently had bad luck with mushrooms," Mrs. Tallman said, the elderly lady who had been a member of the board even in the old days before the Emergency. "It's been our tendency to leave them alone, now."

"I've looked through your pastures and woods in this area," Mr. Barnes said, "and I've seen some fine examples of nutritious mushrooms; you can supplement your diet without taking any chances. I even know their Latin names."

The board stirred and murmured. That had impressed them, Stroud realized, that about the Latin names.

"Why did you leave Oregon?" George Keller, the principal, asked bluntly.

The new teacher faced him and said, "Politics."

“Yours or theirs?”

“Theirs,” Barnes said. “I have no politics. I teach children how to make ink and soap and how to cut the tails from lambs even if the lambs are almost grown. And I’ve got my own books.” He picked up a book from the small stack beside him, showing the board in what good shape they were. “I’ll tell you something else: you have the means here in this part of California to make paper. Did you know that?”

Mrs. Tallman said, “We knew it, Mr. Barnes, but we don’t know quite how. It has to do with bark of trees, doesn’t it?”

On the new teacher’s face appeared a mysterious expression, one of concealment. Stroud knew that Mrs. Tallman was correct, but the teacher did not want to let her know; he wanted to keep the knowledge to himself because the West Marin trustees had not yet hired him. His knowledge was not yet available — he gave nothing free. And that of course was proper; Stroud recognized that, respected Barnes for it. Only a fool gave something away for nothing.

Mrs. Tallman was scrutinizing the new teacher’s stack of books. “I see that you have Carl Jung’s *Psychological Types.* Is one of your sciences psychology? How nice, to acquire a teacher for our school who can tell edible mushrooms and also is an authority on Freud and Jung.”

“There’s no value in such stuff,” Stroud said, with irritation. “We need useful science, not academic hot air.” He felt personally let down; Mr. Barnes had not told him about that, about his interest in mere theory. “Psychology doesn’t dig any septic tanks.”

“I think we’re ready to vote on Mr. Barnes,” Miss Costigan, the youngest member of the board, said. “I for one am in favor of accepting him, at least on a provisional basis. Does anyone feel otherwise?”

Mrs. Tallman said to Mr. Barnes, “We killed our last teacher, you know. That’s why we need another. That’s why we sent Mr. Stroud out looking up and down the Coast until he found you.”

“We killed him because he lied to us,” Miss Costigan said. “You see, his real reason for coming here had nothing to do with teaching. He was looking for some man named Jack Tree, who it turned out lived in this area. Our Mrs. Keller, a respected member of this community and the wife of George Keller, here, our principal, is a dear friend of Mr. Tree, and she brought the news of the situation to us and of course we acted, legally and officially, through our chief of police, Mr. Earl Colvig.”

“I see,” Mr. Barnes said woodenly, listening without interrupting.

Speaking up, Orion Stroud said, “The jury which sentenced and executed him was composed of myself, Cas Stone, who’s the largest land-owner in West Marin, Mrs. Tallman and Mrs. June Raub. I say ‘executed’ but you understand that the act — when he was shot, the shooting itself — was done by Earl. That’s Earl’s job, after the West Marin Official Jury has made its decision.” He eyed the new teacher.

“It sounds,” Mr. Barnes said, “very formal and law-abiding to me. Just what I’d be interested in.” He smiled at them all, and the tension in the room relaxed; people murmured.

A cigarette — one of Andrew Gill’s special deluxe Gold Labels — was lit up; its good, rich smell wafted to them all, cheering them and making them feel more friendly to the new teacher and to one another.

Seeing the cigarette, Mr. Barnes got a strange expression on his face and he said in a husky voice, “You’ve got *tobacco* up here? After seven years?” He clearly could not believe it.

Smiling in amusement, Mrs. Tallman said, “We don’t have any tobacco, Mr. Barnes, because of course no one does. But we do have a tobacco expert. He fashions these special deluxe Gold Labels for us out of choice,

aged vegetable and herbal materials the nature of which remains — and justly so — his individual secret."

"How much do they cost?" Mr. Barnes asked.

"In terms of State of California boodle money," Orion Stroud said, "about a hundred dollars apiece. In terms of pre-war silver, a nickel apiece."

"I have a nickel," Mr. Barnes said, reaching shakily into his coat pocket; he fished about, brought up a nickel and held it toward the smoker, who was George Keller, leaning back in his chair with his legs crossed to make himself comfortable.

"Sorry," George said, "I don't want to sell. You better go directly to Mr. Gill; you can find him during the day at his shop. It's here in Point Reyes Station but of course he gets all around; he has a horse-drawn VW minibus."

"I'll make a note of that," Mr. Barnes said. He put his nickel away, very carefully.

"Do you intend to board the ferry?" the Oakland official asked. "If not, I wish you'd move your car, because it's blocking the gate."

"Sure," Stuart McConchie said. He got back into his car, flicked the reins that made Edward Prince of Wales, his horse, begin pulling. Edward pulled, and the engineless 1975 Pontiac passed back through the gate and out onto the pier.

The Bay, choppy and blue, lay on both sides, and Stuart watched through the windshield as a gull swooped to seize some edible from the pilings. Fishing lines, too… men catching their evening meals. Several of the men wore the remains of Army uniforms. Veterans who perhaps lived beneath the pier. Stuart drove on.

If only he could afford to telephone San Francisco. But the underwater cable was out again, and the lines had to go all the way down to San Jose and up the other side, along the peninsula, and by the time the call reached San Francisco it would cost him five dollars in silver money. So, except for a rich person, that was out of the question; he had to wait the two hours until the ferry left… but could he stand to wait that long?

He was after something important.

He had heard a rumor that a huge Soviet guided missile had been found, one which had failed to go off; it lay buried in the ground near Belmont, and a farmer had discovered it while plowing. The farmer was selling it off in the form of individual parts, of which there were thousands in the guidance system alone. The farmer wanted a penny a part, your choice. And Stuart, in his line of work, needed many such parts. But so did lots of other people. So it was first come, first serve; unless he got across the Bay to Belmont fairly soon, it would be too late.

He sold (another man made them) small electronic traps. Vermin had mutated and now could avoid or repel the ordinary passive trap, no matter how complicated. The cats in particular had become different, and Mr. Hardy built a superior cat trap, even better than his rat and dog traps. The vermin were dangerous; they killed and ate small children almost at will — or at least so one heard. And of course wherever possible they themselves were caught and eaten in return. Dogs in particular, if stuffed with rice, were considered delicious; the little local Berkeley newspaper which came out once a week had recipes for dog soup, dog stew, even dog pudding.

Meditating about dog pudding made Stuart realize how hungry he was. It seemed to him that he had not stopped being hungry since the first bomb fell; his last really adequate meal had been the lunch at Fred’s Fine Foods that day he had run into Hoppy Harrington the phocomelus doing his phony vision act. And where, he wondered suddenly, was that little phoce now? He hadn’t thought of him in years.

Now, of course, one saw many phoces, and almost all of them on their ‘mobiles, exactly as Hoppy had been, placed dead center each in his own little universe, like an armless, legless god. The sight still repelled Stuart, but there were so many repellent sights these days…

On the surface of the Bay to his right a legless veteran propelled himself out onto the water aboard a raft, rowing himself toward a pile of debris that was undoubtedly a sunken ship. On the hulk a number of fishing lines could be seen; they belonged to the veteran and he was in the process of checking them. Watching the raft go, Stuart wondered if it could reach the San Francisco side. He could offer the man fifty cents for a one-way trip; why not? Stuart got out of his car and walked to the edge of the pier.

“Hey,” he yelled, “come here.” From his pocket he got a penny; he tossed it down onto the pier and the veteran saw it, heard it. At once he spun the raft about and came paddling rapidly back, straining to make speed, his face streaked with perspiration. He grinned up friendlily at Stuart, cupping his ear.

“Fish?” he called. “I don’t have any yet today, but maybe later on how about a small shark? Guaranteed safe.” He held up the battered Geiger counter which he had connected to his waist by a length of rope — in case it fell from the raft or someone tried to steal it, Stuart realized.

“No,” Stuart said, squatting down at the edge of the pier. “I want to get over to San Francisco; I’ll pay you a quarter for one way.”

“But I got to leave my lines to do that,” the veteran said, his smile fading. “I got to collect them all or somebody’d steal them while I was gone.”

“Thirty-five cents,” Stuart said.

In the end they agreed, at a price of forty cents. Stuart locked the legs of Edward Prince of Wales together so no one could steal him, and presently

he was out on the Bay, bobbing up and down aboard the veteran's raft, being rowed across to San Francisco.

"What field are you in?" the veteran asked him. "You're not a tax collector, are you?" He eyed him calmly.

"Naw," Stuart said. "I'm a small trap man."

"Listen, my friend," the veteran said, "I got a pet rat lives under the pilings with me? He's smart; he can play the flute. I'm not putting you under an illusion, it's true. I made a little wooden flute and he plays it, through his nose… it's practically an Asiatic nose-flute like they have in India. Well, I did have him, but the other day he got run over. I saw the whole thing happen; I couldn't go get him or nothing. He ran across the pier to get something, maybe a piece of cloth… he has this bed I made him but he gets — I mean he got — cold all the time because they mutated, this particular line, they lost their hair."

"I've seen those," Stuart said, thinking how well the hairless brown rat evaded even Mr. Hardy's electronic vermin traps. "Actually I believe what you said," he said. "I know rats pretty well. But they're nothing compared to those little striped gray-brown tabby cats… I'll bet you had to make the flute, he couldn't construct it himself."

"True," the veteran said. "But he was an artist. You ought to have heard him play; I used to get a crowd at night, after we were finished with the fishing. I tried to teach him the Bach 'Chaconne in D.' "

"I caught one of those tabby cats once," Stuart said, "that I kept for a month until it escaped. It could make little sharp-pointed things out of tin can lids. It bent them or something; I never did see how it did it, but they were wicked."

The veteran, rowing, said, "What's it like south of San Francisco these days? I can't come up on land." He indicated the lower part of his body. "I stay on the raft. There's a little trap door, when I have to go to the

bathroom. What I need is to find a dead phoce sometime and get his cart. They call them phocomobiles."

"I knew the first phoce," Stuart said, "before the war. He was brilliant; he could repair anything." He lit up an imitation-tobacco cigarette; the veteran gaped at it longingly. "South of San Francisco it's as you know all flat. So it got hit bad and it's just farmland now. Nobody ever rebuilt there, and it was mostly those little tract houses so they left hardly any decent basements. They grow peas and corn and beans down there. What I'm going to see is a big rocket a farmer just found; I need relays and tubes and other electronic gear for Mr. Hardy's traps." He paused. "You ought to have a Hardy trap."

"Why? I live on fish, and why should I hate rats? I like them."

"I like them, too," Stuart said, "but you have to be practical; you have to look to the future. Someday America may be taken over by rats if we aren't wary. We owe it to our country to catch and kill rats, especially the wiser ones that would be natural leaders."

The veteran glared at him. "Sales talk, that's all."

"I'm sincere."

"That's what I have against salesmen; they believe their own lies. You know that the best rats can *ever* do, in a million years of evolution, is maybe be useful as servants to we human beings. They could carry messages maybe and do a little manual work. But dangerous —" He shook his head. "How much does one of your traps sell for?"

"Ten dollars silver. No State boodle accepted; Mr. Hardy is an old man and you know how old people are, he doesn't consider boodle to be real money." Stuart laughed.

“Let me tell you about a rat I once saw that did a heroic deed,” the veteran began, but Stuart cut him off.

“I have my own opinions,” Stuart said. “There’s no use arguing about it.” They were both silent, then. Stuart enjoyed the sight of the Bay on all sides; the veteran rowed. It was a nice day, and as they bobbed along toward San Francisco, Stuart thought of the electronic parts he might be bringing back to Mr. Hardy and the factory on San Pablo Avenue, near the ruins of what had once been the west end of the University of California.

“What kind of cigarette is that?” the veteran asked presently.

“This?” Stuart examined the butt; he was almost ready to put it out and stick it away in the metal box in his pocket. The box was full of butts, which would be opened and made into new cigarettes by Tom Grandi, the local cigarette man in South Berkeley. “This,” he said, “is imported. From Marin County. It’s a deluxe Gold Label made by —” He paused for effect. “I guess I don’t have to tell you.”

“By Andrew Gill,” the veteran said. “Say, I’d like to buy a whole one from you; I’ll pay you a dime.”

“They’re worth fifteen cents apiece,” Stuart said. “They have to come all the way around Black Point and Sears’ Point and along the Lucas Valley Road, from beyond Nicasio somewhere.”

“I had one of those Andrew Gill deluxe special Gold Labels one time,” the veteran said. “It fell out of the pocket of some man who was getting on the ferry; I fished it out of the water and dried it.” All of a sudden Stuart handed him the butt.

“For God’s sake,” the veteran said, not looking directly at him. He rowed rapidly, his lips moving, his eyelids blinking.

“I got more,” Stuart said.

The veteran said, “I’ll tell you what else you got; you got real humanity, mister, and that’s rare today. Very rare.”

Stuart nodded. He felt the truth of the veteran’s words.

The little Keller girl sat shivering on the examination table, and Doctor Stockstill, surveying her thin, pale body, thought of a joke which he had seen on television years ago, long before the war. A Spanish ventriloquist, speaking through a chicken… the chicken had produced an egg.

“My son,” the chicken said, meaning the egg.

“Are you sure?” the ventriloquist asked. “It’s not your daughter?”

And the chicken, with dignity, answered, “I know my business.”

This child was Bonny Keller’s daughter, but, Doctor Stockstill thought, it isn’t George Keller’s daughter; I am certain of that… I know my business. Who had Bonny been having an affair with, seven years ago? The child must have been conceived very close to the day the war began. But she had not been conceived before the bombs fell; that was clear. Perhaps it was on that very day, he ruminated. Just like Bonny, to rush out while the bombs were falling, while the world was coming to an end, to have a brief, frenzied spasm of love with someone, perhaps with some man she did not even know, the first man she happened onto… and now this.

The child smiled at him and he smiled back. Superficially, Edie Keller appeared normal; she did not seem to be a funny child. How he wished, God damn it, that he had an x-ray machine. Because —

He said aloud, “Tell me more about your brother.”

“Well,” Edie Keller said in her frail, soft voice, “I talk to my brother all the time and sometimes he answers for a while but more often he’s asleep. He sleeps almost all the time.”

“Is he asleep now?”

For a moment the child was silent. “No,” she answered.

Rising to his feet and coming over to her, Doctor Stockstill said, “I want you to show me exactly where he is.”

The child pointed to her left side, low down; near, he thought, the appendix. The pain was there. That had brought the child in; Bonny and George had become worried. They knew about the brother, but they assumed him to be imaginary, a pretend playmate which kept their little daughter company. He himself had assumed so at first; the chart did not mention a brother, and yet Edie talked about him. Bill was exactly the same age as she. Born, Edie had informed the doctor, at the same time as she, of course.

“Why of course?” he had asked, as he began examining her — he had sent the parents into the other room because the child seemed reticent in front of them.

Edie had answered in her calm, solemn way. “Because he’s my twin brother. How else could he be inside me?” And, like the Spanish ventriloquist’s chicken, she spoke with authority, with confidence; she, too, knew her business.

In the seven years since the war Doctor Stockstill had examined many hundreds of funny people, many strange and exotic variants on the human life form which flourished now under a much more tolerant — although smokily veiled — sky. He could not be shocked. And yet, this — a child whose brother lived inside her body, down in the inguinal region. For seven years Bill Keller had dwelt inside there, and Doctor Stockstill, listening to the girl, believed her; he knew it was possible. It was not the first case of this kind. If he had his x-ray machine he would be able to see the tiny, wizened shape, probably no larger than a baby rabbit. In fact, with his hands

he could feel the outline… he touched her side, carefully noting the firm cyst-like sack within. The head in a normal position, the body entirely within the abdominal cavity, limbs and all. Someday the girl would die and they would open her body, perform an autopsy; they would find a little wrinkled male figure, perhaps with a snowy beard and blind eyes… her brother, still no larger that a baby rabbit.

Meanwhile, Bill slept mostly, but now and then he and his sister talked. What did Bill have to say? What possibly could he know?

To the question, Edie had an answer. “Well, he doesn’t know very much. He doesn’t see anything but he thinks. And I tell him what’s going on so he doesn’t miss out.”

“What are his interests?” Stockstill asked.

Edie considered and said, “Well, he, uh, likes to hear about food.”

“Food!” Stockstill said, fascinated.

“Yes. He doesn’t eat, you know. He likes me to tell him over and over again what I had for dinner, because he does get it after a while… I think he does, anyhow. Wouldn’t he have to, to live?”

“Yes,” Stockstill agreed.

“He especially likes it if I have apples or oranges. And — he likes to hear stories. He always wants to hear about places, far-away especially like New York. I want to take him there someday, so he can see what it’s like. I mean, so I can see and then tell him.”

“You take good care of him, don’t you?” Stockstill said, deeply touched. To the girl, it was normal; she had lived like this always — she did not know of any other existence.

“I’m afraid,” she said suddenly, “that he might die someday.”

“I don’t think he will,” Stockstill said. “What’s more likely to happen is that he’ll get larger. And that might pose a problem; it might be hard for your body to accommodate him.”

“Would he be born, then?” Edie regarded him with large, dark eyes.

“No,” Stockstill said. “He’s not located that way. He’d have to be removed — surgically. But he wouldn’t live. The only way he can live is as he is now, inside you.” Parasitically, he thought, not saying the word. “We’ll worry about that when the time comes, if it ever does.”

Edie said, “I’m glad I have a brother; he keeps me from being lonely. Even when he’s asleep I can feel him there, I know he’s there. It’s like having a baby inside me; I can’t wheel him around in a baby carriage or anything like that, or dress him, but talking to him is a lot of fun. For instance, I get to tell him about Mildred.”

“Mildred!” He was puzzled.

“You know.” The child smiled at his ignorance. “The woman that keeps coming back to Philip. And spoils his life. We listen every night. The satellite.”

“Of course.” It was Walt Dangerfield’s reading of the Maugham book, the disc jockey as he passed in his daily orbit above their heads. Eerie, Doctor Stockstill thought, this parasite dwelling within her body, in unchanging moisture and darkness, fed by her blood, hearing from her in some unfathomable fashion a second-hand account of a famous novel… it makes Bill Keller part of our culture. He leads his grotesque social existence, too… God knows what he makes of the story. Does he have fantasies about it, about our life? Does he *dream* about us?

Bending, Doctor Stockstill kissed the girl on her forehead. “Okay,” he said. “You can go, now. I’ll talk to your mother and father for a minute; there’re some very old genuine pre-war magazines out in the waiting room that you can read.”

When he opened the door, George and Bonny Keller rose to their feet, faces taut with anxiety.

“Come in,” Stockstill said to them. And shut the door after them. He had already decided not to tell them the truth about their daughter… and, he thought, about their son. Better they did not know.

When Stuart McConchie returned to the East Bay from his trip to the peninsula he found that someone — no doubt a group of veterans living under the pier — had killed and eaten his horse, Edward Prince of Wales. All that remained was the skeleton, legs and head, a heap worthless to him or to anyone else. He stood by it, pondering. Well, it had been a costly trip. And he had arrived too late anyhow; the farmer, at a penny apiece, had already disposed of the electronic parts of his Soviet missile.

Mr. Hardy would supply another horse, no doubt, but he had been fond of Edward. And it was wrong to kill a horse for food because they were so vitally needed for other purposes; they were the mainstay of transportation, now that most of the wood had been consumed by the wood-burning cars and by people in cellars using it in the winter to keep warm. And horses were needed in the job of reconstruction — they were the main source of power, in the absence of electricity. The stupidity of killing Edward Prince of Wales maddened him; it was, he thought, like barbarism, the thing they all feared. It was anarchy, and right in the middle of the city; right in downtown Oakland, in broad day. It was what he would expect the Red Chinese to do.

Now, on foot, he walked slowly toward San Pablo Avenue. The sun had begun to descend into the lavish, extensive sunset which they had become accustomed to seeing in the years since the Emergency. He scarcely noticed it. Maybe I ought to go into some other business, he said to himself. Small

animal traps — it's a living, but there's no advancement possible in it. I mean, where can you rise to in a business like that?

The loss of his horse had depressed him; he gazed down at the broken, grass-infested sidewalk as he picked his way along, past the rubble which had once been factories. From a burrow in a vacant lot something with eager eyes noted his passing; something, he surmised gloomily, that ought to be hanging by its hind legs minus its skin.

These ruins, the smoky, flickering pallor of the sky… the eager eyes still following him as the creature calculated whether it could safely attack him. Bending, he picked up a hunk of concrete and chucked it at the burrow — a dense layer of organic and inorganic material packed tightly, glued in place by some sort of white slime. The creature had emulsified debris lying around, had reformed it into a usable paste. Must be a brilliant animal, he thought. But he did not care.

I've evolved, too, he said to himself. My wits are much clearer than they formerly were; I'm a match for you any time. So give up.

Evolved, he thought, but no better off then I was before the goddam Emergency; I sold TV sets then and now I sell electronic vermin traps. What is the difference? One's as bad as the other. I'm going downhill, in fact.

A whole day wasted. In two hours it would be dark and he would be going to sleep, down in the cat-pelt-lined basement room which Mr. Hardy rented him for a dollar in silver a month. Of course, he could light his fat lamp; he could burn it for a little while, read a book or part of a book — most of his library consisted of merely sections of books, the remaining portions having been destroyed or lost. Or he could visit old Mr. and Mrs. Hardy and sit in on the evening transmission from the satellite.

After all, he had personally radioed a request to Dangerfield just the other day, from the transmitter out on the mudflats in West Richmond. He had asked for "Good Rockin' Tonight," an old-fashioned favorite which he

remembered from his childhood. It was not known if Dangerfield had that tune in his miles of tapes, however, so perhaps he was waiting in vain. As he walked along he sang to himself:

Oh I heard the news:

There's good rockin' tonight.

Oh I heard the *news*!

There's good rockin' tonight!

Tonight I'll be a mighty fine man,

I'll hold my baby as tight as I can —

It brought tears to his eyes to remember one of the old songs, from the world the way it was. All gone now, he said to himself. And what do we have instead, a rat that can play the nose flute, and not even that because the rat got run over.

I'll bet the rat couldn't play that, he said to himself. Not in a million years. That's practically sacred music. Out of our past, that no brilliant animal and no funny person can share. The past belongs only to us genuine human beings.

While he was thinking that he arrived on San Pablo Avenue with its little shops open here and there, little shacks which sold everything from coat hangers to hay. One of them, not far off, was HARDY'S HOMEOSTATIC VERMIN TRAPS , and he headed in that direction.

As he entered, Mr. Hardy glanced up from his assembly table in the rear; he worked under the white light of an arc lamp, and all around him lay heaps of electronic parts scavenged from every region of Northern California. Many had come from the ruins out in Livermore; Mr. Hardy had connections with State Officials and they had permitted him to dig there in the restricted deposits.

In former times Dean Hardy had been an engineer for an AM radio station; he was a slender, quiet-spoken elderly man who wore a sweater and necktie even now — and a tie was rare, in these times.

“They ate my horse.” Stuart seated himself opposite Hardy.

At once Ella Hardy, his employer’s wife, appeared from the living quarters in the rear; she had been fixing dinner. “You left him?”

“Yes,” he admitted. “I thought he was safe out on the City of Oakland public ferry pier; there’s an official there who —”

“It happens all the time,” Hardy said wearily. “The bastards. Somebody ought to drop a cyanide bomb under that pier; those war vets are down there by the hundreds. What about the car? You had to leave it.”

“I’m sorry,” Stuart said.

“Forget it,” Hardy said. “We have more horses out at our Orinda store. What about parts from the rocket?”

“No luck,” Stuart said. “All gone when I got there. Except for this.” He held up a handful of transistors. “The farmer didn’t notice these; I picked them up for nothing. I don’t know if they’re any good, though.” Carrying them over to the assembly table he laid them down. “Not much for an all-day trip.” He felt more glum than ever.

Without a word, Ella Hardy returned to the kitchen; the curtain closed after her.

“You want to have some dinner with us?” Hardy said, shutting off his light and removing his glasses.

“I don’t know,” Stuart said. “I feel strange.” He roamed about the shop. “Over on the other side of the Bay I saw something I’ve heard about but didn’t believe. A flying animal like a bat but not a bat. More like a weasel, very skinny and long, with a big head. They call them *tommies* because they’re always gliding up against windows and looking in, like peeping toms.”

Hardy said, “It’s a squirrel.” He leaned back in his chair, loosened his necktie. “They evolved from the squirrels in Golden Gate Park. I once had a scheme for them… they could be useful — in theory, at least — as message carriers. They can glide or fly or whatever they do for almost a mile. But they’re too feral. I gave it up after catching one.” He held up his right hand. “Look at the scar, there on my thumb. That’s from a tom.”

“This man I talked to said they taste good. Like old-time chicken. They sell them at stalls in downtown San Francisco; you see old ladies selling them cooked for a quarter apiece, still hot, very fresh.”

“Don’t try one,” Hardy said. “Many of them are toxic. It has to do with their diet.”

“Hardy,” Stuart said suddenly, “I want to get out of the city and out into the country.”

His employer regarded him.

“It’s too brutal here,” Stuart said.

“It’s brutal everywhere.” He added, “And out in the country it’s hard to make a living.”

“Do you sell any traps in the country?”

“No,” Hardy said. “Vermin live in towns, where there’s ruins. You know that. Stuart, you’re a woolgatherer. The country is sterile; you’d miss the

flow of ideas that you have here in the city. Nothing happens, they just farm and listen to the satellite."

"I'd like to take a line of traps out say around Napa and Sonoma," Stuart persisted. "I could trade them for wine, maybe; they grow grapes up there, I understand, like they used to."

"But it doesn't taste the same," Hardy said. "The ground is too altered." He shook his head. "Really awful. Foul."

"They drink it, though," Stuart said. "I've seen it here in town, brought in on those old wood-burning trucks."

"People will drink anything they can get their hands on now." Hardy raised his head and said thoughtfully, "You know who has liquor? I mean the genuine thing; you can't tell if it's pre-war that he's dug up or new that he's made."

"Nobody in the Bay Area."

"Andrew Gill, the tobacco expert. Oh, he doesn't sell much. I've seen one bottle, a fifth of brandy. I had one single drink from it." Hardy smiled at him crookedly, his lips twitching. "You would have liked it."

"How much does he want for it?"

"More than you have to pay."

I wonder what sort of a man Andrew Gill is, Stuart said to himself. Big, maybe, with a beard, a vest… walking with a silver-headed cane; a giant of a man with wavy hair, imported monocle — I can picture him.

Seeing the expression on Stuart's face, Hardy leaned toward him. "I can tell you what else he sells. Girly photos. In artistic poses — you know."

“Aw Christ,” Stuart said, his imagination boggling; it was too much. “I don’t believe it.”

“God’s truth. Genuine pre-war girly calendars, from as far back as 1950. They’re worth a fortune, of course. I’ve heard of a thousand silver dollars changing hands over a 1963 *Playboy* calendar.” Now Hardy had become pensive; he gazed off into space.

“Where I worked when the bomb fell,” Stuart said, “at Modern TV Sales & Service, we had a lot of girly calendars downstairs in the repair department. They were all incinerated, naturally.” At least so he had always assumed. “Suppose a person were poking around in the ruins somewhere and he came onto an entire warehouse full of girly calendars. Can you imagine that?” His mind raced. “How much could he get? Millions! He could trade them for real estate; he could acquire a whole county!”

“Right,” Hardy said, nodding.

“I mean, he’d be rich forever. They make a few in the Orient, in Tokyo, but they’re no good.”

“I’ve seen them,” Hardy agreed. “They’re crude. The knowledge of how to do it has declined, passed into oblivion; it’s an art that has died out. Maybe forever.”

“Don’t you think it’s partly because there aren’t the girls any more who look like that?” Stuart said. “Everybody’s scrawny now and have no teeth; the girls most of them now have burn-scars from radiation and with no teeth what kind of a girly calendar does that make?”

Shrewdly, Hardy said, “I think the girls exist. I don’t know where, maybe in Sweden or Norway, maybe in out-of-the-way places like the Solomon Islands. I’m convinced of it from what people coming in by ship say. Not in the U.S. or Europe or Russia or China, any of the places that were hit — I agree with you there.”

“Could we find them?” Stuart said. “And go into the business?”

After considering for a little while Hardy said, “There’s no film. There’re no chemicals to process it. Most good cameras have been destroyed or have disappeared. There’s no way you could get your calendars printed in quantity. If you did print them —”

“But if someone could find a girl with no burns and good teeth, the way they had before the war —”

“I’ll tell you,” Hardy said, “what would be a good business. I’ve thought about it many times.” He faced Stuart meditatively. “Sewing machine needles. You could name your own price; you could have anything.”

Gesturing, Stuart got up and paced about the shop. “Listen, I’ve got my eye on the big time; I don’t want to mess around with selling any more — I’m fed up with it. I sold aluminum pots and pans and encyclopedias and TV sets and now these vermin traps. They’re good traps and people want them, but I just feel there must be something else for me. I don’t mean to insult you, but I want to grow. I *have* to; you either grow or you go stale, you die on the vine. The war set me back years, it set us all back. I’m just where I was ten years ago, and that’s not good enough.”

Scratching his nose, Hardy murmured, “What did you have in mind?”

“Maybe I could find a mutant potato that would feed everybody in the world.”

“Just one potato?”

“I mean a type of potato. Maybe I could become a plant breeder, like Luther Burbank. There must be millions of freak plants growing around out in the country, like there’s all these freak animals and funny people here in the city.”

Hardy said, “Maybe you could locate an intelligent bean.”

“I’m not joking about this,” Stuart said quietly.

They faced each other, neither speaking.

“It’s a service to humanity,” Hardy said at last, “to make homeostatic vermin traps that destroy mutated cats and dogs and rats and squirrels. I think you’re acting infantile. Maybe your horse being eaten while you were over in South San Francisco —”

Entering the room, Ella Hardy said, “Dinner is ready, and I’d like to serve it while it’s hot. It’s baked cod-head and rice and it took me three hours standing in line down at Eastshore Freeway to get the cod-head.”

The two men rose to their feet. “You’ll eat with us?” Hardy asked Stuart. At the thought of the baked fish head, Stuart’s mouth watered. He could not say no and he nodded, following after Mrs. Hardy to the kitchen.

Hoppy Harrington, the handyman phocomelus of West Marin, did an imitation of Walt Dangerfield when the transmission from the satellite failed; he kept the citizens of West Marin amused. As everyone knew, Dangerfield was sick and he often faded out, now. Tonight, in the middle of his imitation, Hoppy glanced up to see the Kellers, with their little girl, enter the Forresters’ Hall and take seats in the rear. About time, he said to himself, glad of a greater audience. But then he felt nervous, because the little girl was scrutinizing him. There was something in the way she looked; he ceased suddenly and the hall was silent.

“Go ahead, Hoppy,” Cas Stone called.

“Do that one about Kool-Ade,” Mrs. Tallman called. “Sing that, the little tune the Kool-Ade twins sing; you know.”

” ‘Kool-Ade, Kool-Ade, can’t wait,’ ” Hoppy sang, but once more he stopped. “I guess that’s enough for tonight,” he said.

The room became silent once again.

“My brother,” the little Keller girl spoke up, “he says that Mr. Dangerfield is somewhere in this place.”

Hoppy laughed. “That’s right,” he said excitedly.

“Has he done the reading?” Edie Keller asked. “Or was he too sick tonight to do it?”

“Oh yeah, the reading’s in progress,” Earl Colvig said, “but we’re not listening; we’re tired of sick old Walt - we’re listening to Hoppy and watching what he does. He did funny things tonight, didn’t you, Hoppy?”

“Show the little girl how you moved that coin from a distance,” June Raub said. “I think she’d enjoy that.”

“Yes, do that again,” the pharmacist called from his seat. “That was good; we’d all like to see that again, I’m sure.” In his eagerness to watch he rose to his feet, forgetting that people were behind him.

“My brother,” Edie said quietly, “wants to hear the reading. That’s what he came for.”

“Be still,” Bonny, her mother, said to her.

Brother, Hoppy thought. She doesn’t have any brother. He laughed out loud at that, and several people in the audience smiled. “Your *brother*?” he said, wheeling his phocomobile toward the child. “I can do the reading; I can be Philip and Mildred and everybody in the book; I can be Dangerfield. Sometimes I actually am. I was tonight, and that’s why your brother thinks

Dangerfield's in the room. What it is, it's me." He looked around at the people. "Isn't that right, folks? Isn't it actually me?"

"That's right, Hoppy," Orion Shroud agreed. Everyone nodded.

"You have no brother, Edie," Hoppy said to the little girl. "Why do you say your brother wants to hear the reading when you have no brother?" He laughed and laughed. "Can I see him? Talk to him? Let me hear him talk and — I'll do an imitation of him."

"That'll be quite an imitation," Cas Stone chuckled.

"Like to hear that," Earl Colvig said.

"I'll do it," Hoppy said, "as soon as he says something to me." He sat in the center of his 'mobile, waiting. "I'm waiting," he said.

"That's enough," Bonny Keller said. "Leave my child alone." Her cheeks were red with anger.

"Lean down," Edie said to Hoppy. "Toward me. And he'll speak to you." Her face, like her mother's, was grim.

Hoppy leaned toward her, cocking his head on one side, mockingly.

A voice, speaking from inside him, as if it were part of the interior world, said, "How did you fix that record changer? How did you *really* do that?"

Hoppy screamed.

Everyone was staring at him, white-faced; they were on their feet, now, all of them rigid.

“I heard Jim Fergesson,” Hoppy said. “A man I worked for, once. A man who’s dead.”

The girl regarded him calmly. “Do you want to hear my brother say more? Say some more words to him, Bill; he wants you to say more.”

And, in Hoppy’s interior mind, the voice said, “It looked like you healed it. It looked like instead of replacing that broken spring —”

Hoppy wheeled his cart wildly, spun up the aisle to the far end of the room, wheeled again and sat panting, a long way from the Keller child; his heart pounded and he stared at her. She returned his stare silently.

“Did he scare you?” Now the child was openly smiling at him, but her smile was empty and cold. “He paid you back because you were picking on me. It made him angry. So he did that.”

Coming up beside Hoppy, George Keller said, “What happened, Hop?”

“Nothing,” he said shortly. “Maybe we better listen to the reading.” Sending out his manual extensor, he turned up the volume of the radio.

You can have what you want, you and your brother, he thought. Dangerfield’s reading or anything else. *How long have you been in there?* Only seven years? It seems more like forever. As if — you’ve always existed. It had been a terribly old, wizened, white thing that had spoken to him. Something hard and small, floating. Lips overgrown with downy hair that hung trailing, streamers of it, wispy and dry. I bet it was Fergesson, he said to himself; it felt like him. He’s in there, inside that child. I wonder. Can he get out?

Edie Keller said to her brother, “What did you do to scare him like you did? He really was scared.”

From within her the familiar voice said, “I was someone he used to know, a long time ago. Someone dead.”

Amused, she said, “Are you going to do any more to him?”

“If I don’t like him,” Bill said, “I may do more to him, a lot of different things, maybe.”

“How did you know about the dead person?”

“Oh,” Bill said, “because — you know why. Because I’m dead, too.” He chuckled, deep down inside her stomach; she felt him quiver.

“No you’re not,” she disagreed. “You’re as alive as I am, so don’t say that; it isn’t right.” It frightened her.

Bill said, “I was just pretending. I’m sorry. I wish I could have seen his face… how did it look?”

“Awful,” Edie said. “It turned all inward, like a frog’s.”

“I wish I could come out,” Bill said plaintively. “I wish I could be born like everybody else. Can’t I be born later on?”

“Doctor Stockstill says you couldn’t.”

“Maybe I could *make* Doctor Stockstill let me out. I can do that if I want.”

“No,” she said. “You’re lying; you can’t do anything but sleep and talk to the dead and maybe do imitations like you did. That isn’t much.”

There was no response from within.

“If you did anything bad,” she said, “I could swallow something that would kill you. So you better behave.”

She felt more and more afraid of him; she was talking to herself, trying to bolster her confidence. Maybe it would be a good thing if you did die, she thought. Only then I’d have to carry you around still, and it — wouldn’t be pleasant. I wouldn’t like that.

She shuddered.

“Don’t worry about me,” Bill said suddenly. “I know a lot of things; I can take care of myself. I’ll protect you, too. You better be glad about me because I can look at everyone who’s dead, like the man I imitated. There’re a whole lot of them, trillions and trillions of them and they’re all different. When I’m asleep I hear them muttering. They’re still around.”

“Around where?” she asked.

“Underneath us,” Bill said. “Down in the ground.”

“Brrr,” she said.

“It’s true. And we’re going to be there, too. And so is Mommy and Daddy and everyone else. You’ll see.”

“I don’t want to see,” she said. “Please don’t say any more. I want to listen to the reading.”

Andrew Gill glanced up from his task of rolling cigarettes to see Hoppy Harrington — whom he did not like — entering the factory with a man whom he did not know. At once Gill felt uneasy. He set down his tobacco paper and rose to his feet. Beside him at the long bench the other rollers, his employees, continued at their work.

He employed, in all, eight men, and this was in the tobacco division alone. The distillery, which produced brandy, employed another twelve. His was the largest commercial enterprise in West Marin and he sold his products all over Northern California; his cigarettes had even gotten back to the East Coast and were known there.

“Yes?” he said to Hoppy. He placed himself in front of the phoce’s cart, halting him.

Hoppy stammered. “This m-man came up from Oakland to see you, Mr. Gill. He’s an important businessman, he says. Isn’t that right?” The phoce turned to the man beside him. “Isn’t that what you told me, Stuart?”

Holding out his hand, the man said, “I represent the Hardy Homeostatic Vermin Trap Corporation of Berkeley, California. I’m here to acquaint you with an amazing proposition that could well mean tripling your profits within six months.” His eyes flashed.

Gill repressed the impulse to laugh aloud. “I see,” he said, nodding. “Very interesting, Mr. —” He glanced questioningly at the phoce.

“M-mr. Stuart McConchie,” the phoce stammered. “I knew him before the war; I haven’t seen him in all that time and now he’s migrated up here, the same as I did.”

“My employer, Mr. Hardy,” Stuart McConchie said, “has empowered me to describe to you in detail the design of a fully-automated cigarette-making machine. We at Hardy Homeostatic are well aware of the fact that your cigarettes are rolled entirely in the old-fashioned way. By hand.” He pointed toward the employees at the long bench. “Such a method is a century out of date, Mr. Gill. You’ve achieved superb quality in your special deluxe Gold Label cigarettes —”

“Which I intend to maintain,” Gill said quietly.

Stuart McConchie said, “Our automated electronic equipment will in no way sacrifice quality for quantity. In fact —”

“Wait,” Gill said. “I don’t want to discuss this now.” He glanced toward the phoce, who was parked close by, listening. The phoce flushed and at once spun his ‘mobile away.

“I’m going,” Hoppy said sullenly. “This doesn’t interest me anyhow; goodbye.” He wheeled through the open door, out onto the street. The two of them watched him until he disappeared.

“Our handy,” Gill said. “Fixes — heals, rather — everything that breaks. Hoppy Harrington, the human handless handy.”

Strolling a few steps away, surveying the factory and the men at their work, McConchie said, “Nice place you have here, Gill. I want to state right now how much I admire your product; it’s first in its field.”

I haven’t heard talk like that, Gill realized, in seven years. It was difficult to believe that it still existed in the world; so much had changed, and yet here, in this man McConchie, it remained intact. Gill felt a glow of pleasure. It reminded him of happier times, this salesman’s line of patter. He felt amiably inclined toward the man.

“Thank you,” he said, and he meant it. Perhaps the world, at last, was really beginning to regain some of its old forms, its civilities and customs and preoccupations, all that had gone into it to make it what it was.

“How about a cup of coffee?” Gill said. “I’ll take a break for ten minutes and you can tell me about this fully automated machine of yours.”

“Real coffee?” McConchie said, and the pleasant, optimistic mask slid for an instant from his face; he gaped at Gill with naked hunger.

“Sorry,” Gill said. “A substitute. But not bad; I think you’ll like it. Better than what’s sold in the city at those so-called ‘coffee’ stands.” He went to get the pot of water.

“Coming here,” McConchie said, “is a long-time dream fulfilled. It took me a week to make the trip and I’ve been mulling about it ever since I smoked my first special deluxe Gold Label. It’s —” He groped for the words to express his thought. “An island of civilization in these barbaric times.” He roamed about the factory, hands in his pockets. “Life seems more peaceful here. In the city if you leave your horse — well, a while ago I left my horse to go across the Bay and when I got back someone had eaten it, and it’s things like that that make you disgusted with the city and want to move on.”

“I know,” Gill said, nodding. “It’s brutal in the city because there’re still so many homeless and destitute people.”

“I really loved that horse,” Stuart McConchie said, looking sad.

“Well,” Gill said, “in the country you’re faced constantly with the death of animals. When the bombs fell, thousands of animals up here were horribly injured; sheep and cattle… but that can’t compare of course to the loss of human life down where you come from. You must have seen a good deal of human suffering since E-Day.”

McConchie nodded. “That and the sporting. The freaks both as regards animals and people. Like my old buddy Hoppy Harrington, but of course he’s from before; at Modern TV Sales & Service where we worked we used to say Hoppy was from that drug, that thalidomide.”

“What sort of vermin trap does your company make?” Gill asked.

“It’s not a passive type. Being homeostatic, that is, self-notifying, it follows for instance a rat or a cat or dog down into the network of burrows such as now underlie Berkeley and Oakland… it pursues one vermin after

another, killing one and going on to the next — until it runs out of power or by chance a brilliant vermin manages to destroy it. There are a few such brilliant rats that know how to lame a Hardy Homeostatic Vermin Trap. But not many."

"Impressive," Gill murmured.

"Now, our proposed cigarette-rolling machine —"

"My friend," Gill said, "I like you but — here's the problem. I don't have any money to buy your machine and I don't have anything to trade you. And I don't intend to let anyone enter my business as a partner. So what does that leave?" He smiled. "I must continue as I am."

"Wait," McConchie said instantly. "There has to be a solution. Maybe we could lease you a Hardy cigarette-rolling machine in exchange for x-number of cigarettes, your special deluxe Gold Label variety, of course, delivered each week for x-number of weeks." His face glowed with animation. "The Hardy Company for instance could become sole licensed distributors of your cigarette; we could represent you everywhere, develop a systematic program of outlets up and down California. What do you say to that?"

"I must admit it does sound interesting. I admit that distribution has not been my cup of tea… I've thought on and off for several years about the need of getting an organization going, especially with my factory being located in a rural spot. I've even thought about moving back into the city, but the theft and vandalism is too great there. Anyhow I don't *want* to move into the city; this is my home, here."

He did not say anything about Bonny Keller. That was his actual reason for remaining in West Marin; his affair with her had ended years ago but he was more in love with her now than ever — he had watched her go from man to man, becoming dissatisfied with each of them, and Gill believed in his own heart that someday he would get her back. And Bonny was the mother of his daughter; he was well aware that Edie Keller was his child.

“Since you’re just up from the city,” he said aloud, “I will ask you this… is there any interesting national or international news, of late, that we might not have heard? We do get the satellite, but I’m frankly tired of disc jockey talk and music. And those endless readings.”

They both laughed. “I know what you mean,” McConchie said, sipping his coffee and nodding. “Well, I understand that an attempt is being made to produce an automobile again, somewhere around the ruins of Detroit. It’s mostly made of plywood but it does run on kerosene.”

“I don’t know where they’re going to get the kerosene,” Gill said. “Before they build a car they better get a few refineries operating again. And repair a few major roads.”

“Oh, something else. The Government plans to reopen Route Forty across the Rockies sometime this year. For the first time since the war.”

“That’s great news,” Gill said, pleased. “I didn’t know that.”

“And the telephone company —”

“Wait,” Gill said, rising. “How about a little brandy in your coffee? How long has it been since you’ve had a coffee royal?”

“Years,” Stuart McConchie said.

“This is Gill’s Five Star. My own. From the Sonoma Valley.” He poured from the squat bottle into McConchie’s cup.

“Here’s something else that might interest you.” McConchie reached into his coat pocket and brought out something flat and folded. He opened it, spread it out, and Gill saw an envelope.

Mail service. A letter from New York.

“That’s right,” McConchie said. “Delivered to my boss, Mr. Hardy. All the way from the East Coast; it only took four weeks. The Government in Cheyenne, the military people; they’re responsible. It’s done partly by blimp, partly by truck, partly by horse. The last stage is by foot.”

“Good Lord,” Gill said. And he poured some Gill’s Five Star into *his* coffee, too.

Bill Keller heard the small animal, the snail or slug near him, and at once he got into it. But he had been tricked; it was sightless. He was out but he could not see or hear this time, he could only move.

“Let me back,” he called to his sister in panic. “Look what you did, you put me into something *wrong*.” You did it on purpose, he said to himself as he moved. He moved on and on, searching for her.

If I could reach out, he thought. Reach — upward. But he had nothing to reach with, no limbs of any sort. What am I now that I’m out again? he asked himself as he tried to reach up. What do they call those things up there that shine? Those lights in the sky… can I see them without having eyes? No, he thought; I can’t.

He moved on; raising himself now and then as high as possible and then sinking back, once more to crawl, to do the one thing possible for him in his born, outside life.

In the sky, Walt Dangerfield moved, in his satellite, although he sat resting with his head in his hands. The pain inside him had grown, changed, absorbed him until, as so many times before, he could imagine nothing else.

How long can I keep going? he asked himself. How long will I live?

There was no one to answer.

Edie Keller, with a delicious shiver of exultation, watched the angleworm crawling slowly across the ground and knew with certitude that her brother was in it.

For inside her, down in her stomach, the mentality of the worm now resided; she heard its monotonous voice. “Boom, boom, boom,” it went, in echo of its own nondescript biological processes.

“Get out of me, worm,” she giggled. What did the worm think about its new existence? Was it as dumbfounded as Bill probably was? I have to keep my eye on him, she realized, meaning the creature wriggling across the ground. For he might get lost. “Bill,” she said, bending over him, “you look funny. You’re all red and long; did you know that?” And then she thought, What I should have done was put him in the body of another human being. Why didn’t I do that? Then it would be like it ought to be; I would have a real brother, outside of me, who I could play with.

But on the other hand she would have a strange, new person inside her. And that did not sound like much fun.

Who would do? she asked herself. One of the kids at school? An adult? Mr. Barnes, my teacher, maybe. Or —

Hoppy Harrington. Who is afraid of Bill anyhow.

“Bill,” she said, kneeling down and picking up the angleworm; she held it in the palm of her hand. “Wait until you hear my plan.” She held the worm against her side, where the hard lump within lay. “Get back inside now. You don’t want to be a worm anyhow; it’s no fun.”

Her brother’s voice once more came to her. “You — I hate you, I’ll never forgive you. You put me in a blind thing with no legs or nothing! All I could do was drag myself around!”

“I know,” she said, rocking back and forth, cupping the now-useless worm in her hand still. “Listen, did you hear me? You want to do that, Bill,

what I said? Shall I get near Hoppy Harrington? You'd have eyes and ears; you'd be a real outside person."

"It scares me."

"But I want to," Edie said, rocking back and forth. "We're going to, Bill; we're going to give you eyes and ears — *now*."

There was no answer from Bill; he had turned his thoughts away from her and her world, into the regions which only he could reach. Talking to those old crummy, sticky dead, Edie said to herself. Those empty poo-poo dead that never had any fun or nothing.

It won't do you any good, Bill, she thought. Because I've decided.

Hurrying down the path in her robe and slippers, through the night darkness, Edie Keller groped her way toward Hoppy Harrington's house.

"If you're going to do it you have to hurry," Bill cried, from deep within her. "He knows about us — they're telling me, the dead are. They say we're in danger. If we can get close enough to him I can do an imitation of someone dead that'll scare him, because he's afraid of dead people. That's because to him the dead are like fathers, lots of fathers, and —"

"Be quiet," Edie said. "Let me *think*." In the darkness she had gotten mixed up. She could not find the path through the oak forest, now, and she halted, breathing deeply, trying to orient herself by the dull gleam of the partial moon overhead.

It's to the left, she thought. Down a hill. I must not fall; he'd hear the noise, he can hear a long way, almost everything. Step by step she descended, holding her breath.

“I’ve got a good imitation ready,” Bill was mumbling; he would not be quiet. “When I get near him I switch with someone dead, and you won’t like that because it’s — sort of squishy, but it’s just for a few minutes and then they can talk to him direct, from inside you. Is that —”

“Shut up,” Edie said desperately. They were now above Hoppy’s house; she saw the lights below. “Please, Bill, please.”

“But I have to explain to you,” Bill went on. “When I —”

He stopped. Inside her there was nothing. She was empty.

“Bill,” she said.

He had gone.

Before her eyes, in the dull moonlight, something she had never seen before bobbed. It rose, jiggled, its long pale hair streaming behind it like a tail; it rose until it hung directly before her face. It had tiny, dead eyes and a gaping mouth, it was nothing but a little hard round head, like a baseball. From its mouth came a squeak, and then it fluttered upward once more, released. She watched it as it gained more and more height, rising above the trees in a swimming motion, ascending in the unfamiliar atmosphere which he had never known before.

“Bill,” she said, “Hoppy took you out of me. Hoppy put you outside.” And you are leaving, she realized; Hoppy is making you go. “Come back,” she said, but it didn’t matter because he could not live outside of her. She knew that. Doctor Stockstill had said that. He could not be born, and Hoppy had heard him and made him born, knowing that he would die.

You won’t get to do your imitation, she realized. I told you to be quiet and you wouldn’t. Straining, she saw — or thought she saw — the hard little object with the streamers of hair, high now above her… and then it disappeared, silently. She was alone.

Why go on now? It was over. She turned, walked back up the hillside, her head lowered, eyes shut, feeling her way. Back to her house, her bed. Inside she felt raw; she felt the tearing loose. If you only could have been quiet, she thought. He would not have heard you. I told you so.

Floating in the atmosphere, Bill Keller saw a little, heard a little, felt the trees and the animals alive and moving among them. He felt the pressure at work on him, lifting him up, but he remembered his imitation and he said it. His voice came out tiny in the cold air; then his ears picked it up and he exclaimed.

“We have been taught a terrible lesson for our folly,” he squeaked, and his voice echoed in his ears, delighting him.

The pressure on him let go; he bobbed up, swimming happily, and then he dove. Down and down he went and just before he touched the ground he went sideways until, guided by the living presence within, he hung suspended above Hoppy Harrington’s house.

“This is God’s way!” he shouted in his thin, tiny voice. “We can see by this awful example that it is time to call a halt to high-altitude nuclear testing. I want all of you to write letters to President Kennedy!” He did not know who President Kennedy was. A living person, perhaps. He looked around for him but he did not see him; he saw oak forests of animals, he saw a bird with noiseless wings that drifted, huge-beaked, eyes staring. Bill squeaked in fright as the noiseless, brown-feathered bird glided his way.

The bird made a dreadful sound, of greed and the desire to rend.

“All of you,” Bill cried, fleeing through the dark, chill air. “You must write letters in protest!”

The glittering eyes of the bird followed behind him as he and it glided above the trees, in the dim moonlight.

The owl reached him. And crunched him, in a single instant. Once more he was within. He could no longer see or hear; it had been for a short time and now it was over. The owl, hooting, flew on. Bill Keller said to the owl, “Can you hear me?”

Maybe it could; maybe not. It was only an owl; it did not have any sense, as Edie had. Can I live inside you? he asked it, hidden away in here where no one knows… you have your flights that you make, your passes. With him, in the owl, were the bodies of mice and a thing that stirred and scratched, big enough to keep on wanting to live.

Lower, he told the owl. He saw, by means of the owl, the oaks; he saw clearly, as if everything were full of light. Millions of individual objects lay immobile and then he spied one that crept — it was alive and the owl turned that way. The creeping thing, suspecting nothing, hearing no sound, wandered on, out into the open.

An instant later it had been swallowed. The owl flew on. Good, he thought. And, is there more? This goes on all night, again and again, and then there is bathing when it rains, and the long, deep sleeps. Are they the best part? They are.

He said, “Fergesson don’t allow his employees to drink; it’s against his religion, isn’t it?” And then he said, “Hoppy, what’s the light from? Is it God? You know, like in the Bible. I mean, is it true?” The owl hooted.

A thousand dead things within him yammered for attention. He listened, repeated, picked among them. “You dirty little freak,” he said. “Now you listen. Stay down here; we’re below street-level, the bomb won’t get us. People upstairs, they’re going to die. Down here you clear. Space. For them.” Frightened, the owl flapped; it rose higher, trying to evade him. But he continued, sorting and picking and listening on.

“Stay down here,” he repeated. Again the lights of Hoppy’s house came into view; the owl had circled, returned to it, unable to get away. He made it

stay where he wanted it. He brought it closer and closer in its passes to Hoppy. “You moronic jackass,” he said. “Stay where you are.”

The owl, with a furious effort, performed its regular technique; it coughed him up and he plummeted to the ground, trying to catch the currents of air. He crashed among humus and plant-growth; he rolled, giving little squeaks until finally he came to rest in a hollow.

Released, the owl soared off and disappeared.

“Let man’s compassion be witness to this,” he said as he lay in the hollow; he spoke in the minister’s voice from long ago, addressing the congregation of which Hoppy and his father had been a part. “It is ourselves who have done this; we see here only the results of mankind’s own folly.”

Lacking the owl eyes he saw only vaguely; the immaculate illumination seemed to be gone and all that remained were several nearby shapes. They were trees.

He saw, too, the form of Hoppy’s house outlined against the dim night sky.

It was not far off.

“Let me in,” Bill said, moving his mouth. He rolled about in the hollow; he thrashed until the leaves stirred. “I want to come in.”

An animal, hearing him, moved farther off, warily.

“In, in, in,” Bill said. “I can’t stay out here long; I’ll die. Edie, where are you?” He did not feel her nearby; he felt only the presence of the phocomelus within the house.

As best he could he rolled that way.

Early in the morning, Doctor Stockstill arrived at Hoppy Harrington's house to make use of the transmitter in reaching the sick man in the sky, Walter Dangerfield. The transmitter, he noticed, was on, and so were lights here and there; puzzled, he knocked on the door.

The door opened and there sat Hoppy Harrington in the center of his phocomobile. Hoppy regarded him in an odd, cautious, defensive way.

"I want to make another try," Stockstill said, knowing how hopeless it was but wanting to go ahead anyhow. "Is it okay?"

"Yes sir," Hoppy said.

"Is Dangerfield still alive?"

"Yes sir. I'd know if he was dead." Hoppy wheeled aside to admit him. "He must still be up there."

"What's happened?" Stockstill said. "Have you been up all night?"

"Yes," Hoppy said. "Learning to work things." He wheeled the phocomobile about. "It's hard," he said, apparently preoccupied. Now the 'mobile bumped into the end of a table. "I hit that by mistake," Hoppy said. "I'm sorry; I didn't mean to."

Stockstill said, "You seem different."

"I'm Bill Keller," the phocomelus said. "Not Hoppy Harrington." With his right manual extensor he pointed. "There's Hoppy; that's him, from now on."

In the corner lay a shriveled dough-like object several inches long; its mouth gaped in congealed emptiness. It had a human quality to it, and

Stockstill went over to pick it up.

“That was me,” the phocomelus said. “But I got close enough last night to switch. He fought a lot, but he was afraid, so I won. I kept doing one imitation after another. The minister-one got him.”

Stockstill, holding the wizened little creature, said nothing.

“Do you know how to work the transmitter?” the phocomelus asked, presently. “Because I don’t. I tried but I can’t. I got the lights to work; they turn on and off. I practiced that all night.” To demonstrate, he rolled his ‘mobile to the wall, where with his manual extensor he snapped the light switch up and down.

After a time Stockstill said, looking down at the dead, tiny form he held in his hand, “I knew it wouldn’t survive.”

“It did for a while,” the phocomelus said. “For around an hour; that’s pretty good, isn’t it? Part of that time it was in an owl; I don’t know if that counts.”

“I — better get to work trying to contact Dangerfield,” Stockstill said finally. “He may die any time.”

“Yes,” the phocomelus said, nodding. “Want me to take that?” He held out an extensor and Stockstill handed him the homunculus. “That owl ate me,” the phoce said. “I didn’t like that, but it sure had good eyes; I liked that part, using its eyes.”

“Yes,” Stockstill said, reflexively. “Owls have tremendously good eyesight. That must have been quite an experience.” He seated himself at the transmitter. “What are you going to do now?” he asked.

The phoce said, “I have to get used to this body; it’s heavy. I feel gravity… I’m used to just floating about. You know what? I think these

extensors are swell. I can do a lot with them already." The extensors whipped about, touched a picture on the wall, flicked in the direction of the transmitter. "I have to go find Edie," the phoce said. "I want to tell her I'm okay; she probably thinks I died."

Turning on the microphone, Stockstill prepared to contact the satellite overhead. "Walt Dangerfield," he said, "this is Doctor Stockstill in West Marin. Can you hear me? If you can, give me an answer." He paused, then repeated what he had said.

"Can I go?" Bill Keller asked. "Can I look for Edie now?"

"Yes," Stockstill said, rubbing his forehead; he drew his faculties together and said, "You'll be careful, what you do… you may not be able to switch again."

"I don't want to switch again," Bill said. "This is fine, because for the first time there's no one in here but me." The thin phoce-face broke into a smile. "I'm not just part of someone else."

Stockstill pressed the mike button once more. "Walt Dangerfield," he repeated. "Can you hear me?" Is it hopeless? he wondered. Is it worth keeping on?

The phoce, rolling about the room on his 'mobile, like a great trapped beetle, said, "Can I go to school now that I'm out?"

"Yes," Stockstill murmured.

"But I know a lot of things already," Bill said. "From listening with Edie when she was in school; I like Mr. Barnes, don't you? He's a very good teacher… I'm going to like being a pupil in his class." The phoce added, "I wonder what my mother will say?"

Jarred, Stockstill said, “What?” And then he realized who was meant. Bonny Keller. Yes, he thought, it will be interesting to see what Bonny says. This will be repayment in full for her many, many affairs… for her years of love-making with one man after another.

Again he pressed the mike button. And tried once more.

To Bonny Keller, Mr. Barnes said, “I had a talk with your daughter after school today. And I got the distinct impression that she knows about us.”

“Oh Christ, how could she?” Bonny said. Groaning, she sat up; she rearranged her clothes, buttoned her blouse back up. What a contrast this man was to Andrew Gill, who always made love to her right out in the open, in broad daylight, along the oak-lined roads of West Marin, where anyone and anything might go past. Gill had seized her each time as he had the first time — yanking her into it, not babbling or quaking or mumbling… maybe I ought to go back to him, she thought.

Maybe, she thought, I ought to leave them all, Barnes and George and that nutty daughter of mine; I ought to go live with Gill openly, defy the community and be happy for a change.

“Well, if we’re not going to make love,” she said to Barnes, “then let’s walk down to the Forresters’ Hall and listen to the afternoon pass of the satellite.”

Barnes, pleased, said, “Maybe we can find some edible mushrooms on the way.”

“Are you serious?” Bonny said.

“Of course.”

“You fruit,” she said, shaking her head. “You poor fruit. Why did you come to West Marin from Oregon in the first place? Just to teach little kids

and stroll around picking mushrooms?”

“It’s not such a bad life,” Barnes said. “It’s better than any I’ve ever known before, even before the war. And — I also have you.”

Gloomily, Bonny Keller rose to her feet; hands thrust deep in her coat pockets she plodded down the road. Barnes trailed along behind her, trying to keep up with her strides.

“I’m going to remain here in West Marin,” Barnes said. “This is the end of my travels.” Puffing, he added, “Despite my experience with your daughter today —”

“You had no experience,” Bonny said. “It was just your guilty conscience catching up with you. Let’s hurry — I want to hear Dangerfield; at least when *he* talks it’s fun to listen.”

Behind her, Mr. Barnes found a mushroom; he had stopped to bend down. “It’s a chanterelle!” he exclaimed. “Savory and edible —” He picked it, close to the ground, and then began to search for another. “I’ll make you and George a stew,” he informed her as he found another.

Waiting for him to finish, Bonny lit a special deluxe Gold Label cigarette of Andrew Gill’s manufacture, sighed, wandered a few steps along the grass-infested oak-lined country road.

Your Appointment Will Be Yesterday

Sunlight ascended and a penetrating mechanical voice declared, “All right, Lehrer. Time to get up and show ‘em who you are and what you can do. Big man, that Niehls Lehrer; everybody acknowledges it — I hear them talking. Big man, big talent, big job. Much admired by the public at large. You awake now?”

Lehrer, from the bed, said, “Yes.” He sat up, batted the sharp-voiced alarm clock at his bedside into nullification. “Good morning,” he said to the silent apartment. “Slept well; I hope you did, too.”

A press of problems tumbled about his disordered mind as he got grouchily from the bed, wandered to the closet for clothing adequately dirty. Supposed to nail down Ludwig Eng, he said to himself. The tasks of tomorrow become the worse tasks of today. Reveal to Eng that only one copy of his great-selling book is left in all the world; the time is coming soon for him to act, to do the job only he can do. How would Eng feel? After all, sometimes inventors refused to sit still and do their job. Well, he decided, that actually consisted of a syndicate-problem; theirs, not his. He found a stained, rumpled red shirt; removing his pajama top he got into it. The trousers were not so easy; he had to root through the hamper.

And then the packet of whiskers.

My ambition, Lehrer thought as he padded to the bathroom with the whisker packet, is to cross the W.U.S. by streetcar. Whee. At the bowl he washed his face, then lathered on foam-glue, opened the packet and with adroit slappings managed to convey the whiskers evenly to his chin, jowls, neck; in a moment he had expertly gotten the whiskers to adhere. I’m fit now, he decided as he reviewed his countenance in the mirror, to take that streetcar ride; at least as soon as I process my share of sogum.

Switching on the sogum pipe he accepted a good masculine bundle, sighed contentedly as he glanced over the sports section of the San Francisco *Chronicle*, then at last walked to the kitchen and began to lay out soiled dishes. In no time at all he faced a bowl of soup, lambchops, green peas, Martian blue moss with egg sauce and a cup of hot coffee. These he gathered up, slid the dishes from beneath and around them — of course checking the windows of the room to be sure no one saw him — and briskly placed the assorted foods in their proper receptacles which he placed on shelves of the cupboard and in the refrigerator. The time was eight-thirty; he still had fifteen minutes to get to work. No need to kill himself hurrying; the People's Topical Library section B would be there when he arrived.

It had taken him years to work up to B. He did not perform routine work any longer, not at a section B desk, and he most certainly did not have to arrange for the cleaning of thousands of identical copies of a work in the early stages of eradication. In fact strictly speaking he did not have to participate in eradication at all; minions employed wholesale by the library took care of that coarse duty. But he did have to deal tête-à-tête with a vast variety of irritable, surly inventors who balked at their assigned — and according to the syndicate mandatory — final cleaning of the sole-remaining typescript copy of whatever work their name had become linked with — linked by a process which neither he nor the assorted inventors completely understood. The syndicate presumably understood why a particular given inventor received a particular assignment and not some other assignment entirely. For instance, Eng and HOW I MADE MY OWN SWABBLE OUT OF CONVENTIONAL HOUSEHOLD OBJECTS IN MY BASEMENT DURING MY SPARE TIME .

Lehrer reflected as he glanced over the remainder of the newspaper. Think of the responsibility. After Eng finished, no more swabbles in all the world, unless those untrustworthy rogues in the F.N.M. had a couple illicitly tucked away. In fact, even though the ter-cop, the terminal copy, of Eng's book still remained, he already found it difficult to recall what a swabble did and what it looked like. Square? Small? Or round and huge? Hmmm. He put down the newspaper and rubbed his forehead while he attempted to recall — tried to conjure up an accurate mental image of the device while it was still possible to do so. Because as soon as Eng reduced the ter-cop to a

heavily inked silk ribbon, half a ream of bond paper and a folio of fresh carbon paper there existed absolutely no chance for him or for anyone else to recall either the book or the mechanism which the book described.

That task, however, would probably occupy Eng the rest of the year. Cleaning of the ter-cop had to progress line by line, word by word; it could not be handled as were the assembled printed copies. So easy, up until the terminal typescript copy, and then… well, to make it worth it to Eng, to compensate him for the long, arduous work, a really huge bill would be served on him: the task would cost Eng something on the order of twenty-five thousand poscreds. And since eradication of the swabble book would make Eng a poor man, the task…

By his elbow on the small kitchen table the receiver of the phone hopped from its mooring onto the table, and from it came a distant tiny shrill voice. “Goodbye, Niehls.” A woman’s voice.

Lifting the receiver to his ear he said, “Goodbye.”

“I love you, Niehls,” Charise McFadden stated in her breathless, emotion-saturated voice. “Do you love me?”

“Yes, I love you, too,” he said. “When have I seen you last? I hope it won’t be long. Tell me it won’t be long.”

“Most probably tonight,” Charise said. “After work. There’s someone I want you to meet, a virtually unknown inventor who’s desperately eager to get official eradication for his thesis on, ahem, the psychogenic origins of death by meteor-strike. I said that because you’re in section B —”

“Tell him to eradicate his thesis himself.”

“There’s no prestige in that.” Earnestly, Charise pleaded, “It’s really a dreadful piece of theorizing, Niehls; it’s as nutty as the day is long. This boy, this Lance Arbuthnot —”

“That’s his name?” It almost persuaded him. But not quite. In the course of a single day he received many such requests, and every one, without exception came represented as a crank piece by a crank inventor with a crank name. He had held his chair at Section B too long to be easily snared. But still — he had to investigate this; his ethical structure insisted on it. He sighed.

“I hear you groaning,” Charise said brightly.

Lehrer said, “As long as he’s not from the F.N.M.”

“Well — he is.” She sounded guilty. “I think they threw him out, though. That’s why he’s here and not there.”

But that, Lehrer realized, proved nothing. Arbuthnot — possibly — did not share the fanatical militant convictions of the ruling elite of the Free Negro Municipality; possibly he was too moderate, too balanced for the Bards of the republic carved out of quondam Tennessee, Kentucky, Arkansas and Missouri. But then again he perhaps had too fanatical a view. One never knew; not until one met the person, and sometimes not even then. The Bards, being from the East, had managed to dribble a veil over the faces of three-fifths of mankind, a veil which successfully obscured motive, intention and God knew what else.

“And what is more,” Charise continued, “he personally knew Anarch Peak before Peak’s sad shrinking.”

“Sad!” Lehrer bristled. “Good riddance.” There: that had been the foremost eccentric and idiot of the world. All Lehrer needed was the opportunity to rub shoulders with a follower of the newly parasitic Anarch. He shivered, recalling from his professional eclectic books — examining at the library the accounts of mid-twentieth century race violence; out of the riots, lootings and killings of those days had come Sebastian Peak, originally a lawyer, then a master spellbinder, at last a religious fanatic with his own devout following… a following which extended over the planet, although operating primarily in the F.N.M. environs.

“That could get you in trouble with God,” Charise said.

“I have to get to work now,” Lehrer said. “I’ll phone you during my coffee break; meanwhile I’ll do some research on Arbuthnot in the files. My decision as regards his nut-head theory of psychosomatic meteor-strike deaths will have to wait until then. Hello.” He hung up the phone, then, and rose swiftly to his feet. His soiled garments gave off a truly gratifying odor of must as he made his way from his apartment to the elevator; satisfaction as to his grooming made him brighten. Possibly — despite Charise and this, her newest fad, the inventor Arbuthnot — today might be a good day after all.

But, underneath, he doubted it.

When Niehls Lehrer arrived at his section of the library, he found his slim blonde-haired secretary Miss Tomsen trying to rid herself — and him, too — of a tall, sloppily-dressed middle-aged gentleman with a briefcase under his arm.

“Ah, Mr. Lehrer,” the individual said in a dry, hollow voice as he made out Lehrer, obviously recognizing him at once; he approached Niehls, hand extended. “How nice to meet you, sir. Goodbye, goodbye. As you people say out here.” He smiled a flashbulb instantly-vanishing smile at Niehls, who did not return it.

“I’m quite a busy man,” Niehls said, and continued on past Miss Tomsen’s desk to open the inner door to his private suite. “If you wish to see me, you’ll have to make a regular appointment. Hello.” He started to shut the door after him.

“This concerns the Anarch Peak,” the tall man with the briefcase said. “Whom I have reason to believe you’re interested in.”

“Why do you say that?” He paused, irritated. “I don’t recall ever expressing any interest in anyone of Peak’s sort.”

“You must recall. But that’s so. You’re under Phase, here. I’m oriented in the opposite, normal time-direction; therefore what for you will soon happen is for me an experience of the immediate past. *My* immediate past. May I take a few minutes of your time? I could well be of great use to you, sir.” The man chuckled.

” ‘Your time.’ Well-put, if I do say so. Yes, decidedly your time, not mine. Just consider that this visit by myself took place yesterday.” Again he smiled his mechanical smile — and mechanical it was; Niehls now perceived the small but brilliant yellow stripe sewed on the tall man’s sleeve. This person was a robot, required by law to wear the identifying swath so as not to deceive. Realizing this, Niehls’ irritation grew; he had a strict, deeply-imbedded prejudice against robies which he could not rid himself of; which he did not want to rid himself of, as a matter of fact.

“Come in,” Niehls said, holding the door to his lavish suite open. The roby represented some human principal; it had not dispatched itself: that was the law. He wondered who had sent it. Some functionary of the syndicate? Possibly. In any case, better to hear the thing out and then tell it to leave.

Together, in the main workchamber of the library suite, the two of them faced each other.

“My card,” the roby said, extending its hand.

He read the card, scowling.

Carl Gantrix

Attorney At Law W.U.S.

“My employer,” the roby said. “So now you know my name. You may address me as Carl; that would be satisfactory.” Now that the door had shut,

with Miss Tomsen on the other side, the roby's voice had acquired a sudden and surprising authoritative tone.

"I prefer," Niehls said, cautiously, "to address you in the more familiar mode as Carl Junior. If that doesn't offend you." He made his own voice even more authoritative. "You know, I seldom grant audiences to robots. A quirk, perhaps, but one concerning which I am consistent."

"Until now," the robot Carl Junior murmured; it retrieved its card and placed it back in its wallet. Then, seating itself, it began to unzip its briefcase. "Being in charge of section B of the library, you are of course an expert on the Hobart Phase. At least so Mr. Gantrix assumes. Is he correct, sir?" The robot glanced up keenly.

"Well, I deal with it constantly." Niehls affected a vacant, cavalier tone; it was always better to show a superior attitude when dealing with a roby. Constantly necessary to remind them in this particular fashion — as well as in countless others — of their place.

"So Mr. Gantrix realizes. And it is to his credit that via such a realization he has inferred that you have, over the years, become something of an authority on the advantages, uses and manifold disadvantages of the Hobart reverse-time field. True? Not true? Choose one."

Niehls pondered. "I choose the first. Although you must take into account the fact that my knowledge is practical, not theoretical. But I can correctly deal with the vagaries of the Phase without explaining it. You see, I am innately an American; hence pragmatic."

"Certainly." The roby Carl Junior nodded its plastic humanoid head. "Very good, Mr. Lehrer. Now down to business. His Mightiness, the Anarch Peak, has become infantile and will soon shrivel up entirely into a homunculus and reenter a nearby womb. Correct? It is only a matter of time — your time, once again."

“I am aware,” Niehls said, “that the Hobart Phase obtains in most of the F.N.M. I am aware that His Mightiness will be within a handy nearby womb in no more than a matter of months. Frankly, this pleases me. His Mightiness is deranged. Beyond doubt; clinically so, in fact. The world, both that on Hobart Time and on Standard Time, will benefit. What more is there to say?”

“A lot more,” Carl Junior answered gravely. Leaning forward he deposited a host of documents on Niehls’ desk. “I respectfully insist that you examine these.”

Carl Gantrix, by means of the video circuit of the robot’s system, treated himself to a leisurely inspection of the top librarian Niehls Lehrer as that individual ploughed through the wearying stack of deliberately obscure pseudo documents which the robot had presented.

The bureaucrat in Lehrer had been ensnared by the bait; his attention distracted, the librarian had become oblivious to the robot and to its actions. Therefore, as Lehrer read, the robot expertly slid its chair back and to the left side, close to a reference card case of impressive proportions. Lengthening its right arm, the robot crept its manual grippers of fingeroid shape into the nearest file of the case; this Lehrer did of course not see, and so the robot continued with its assigned task. It placed a miniaturized nest of embryonic robots, no larger than pinheads, within the card file, then a tiny find-circuit transmitter behind a subsequent card, then at last a potent detonating device set on a three-day command circuit.

Watching, Gantrix grinned. Only one construct remained in the robot’s possession, and this now appeared briefly as the robot, eyeing Lehrer sideways and cautiously, edged its extensor once more toward the file, transferring this last bit of sophisticated hardware from its possession to the library’s.

“Purp,” Lehrer said, without raising his eyes.

The code signal, received by the aud chamber of the file, activated an emergency release; the file closed in upon itself in the manner of a bivalve seeking safety. Collapsing, the file retreated into the wall, burying itself out of sight. And at the same time it ejected the constructs which the robot had placed inside it; the objects, expelled with electronic neatness, bounced in a trajectory which deposited them at the robot's feet, where they lay exposed in clear view.

"Good heavens," the robot said involuntarily, taken aback.

Lehrer said, "Leave my office immediately." He raised his eyes from the pseudo documents, and his expression was cold. As the robot reached down to retrieve the now-exposed artifacts he added, "And leave those items here; I want them subjected to lab analysis regarding purpose and source." He reached into the top drawer of his desk, and when his hand emerged it held a weapon.

In Carl Gantrix's ears the phone-cable voice of the robot buzzed. "What should I do, sir?"

"Leave presently." Gantrix no longer felt amused; the fuddy-duddy librarian was equal to the probe, was capable in fact of nullifying it. The contact with Lehrer would have to be made in the open, and with that in mind Gantrix reluctantly picked up the receiver of the vidphone closest to him and dialed the library's exchange.

A moment later he saw, through the video scanner of the robot, the librarian Niehls Lehrer picking up his own phone in answer.

"We have a problem," Gantrix said. "Common to us both. Why, then, shouldn't we work together?"

Lehrer answered, "I'm aware of no problem." His voice held ultimate calmness; the attempt by the robot to plant hostile hardware in his work-

area had not ruffled him. “If you want to work together,” he added, “you’re off to a bad start.”

“Admittedly,” Gantrix said. “But we’ve had difficulty in the past with you librarians.” Your exalted position, he thought. But he did not say it. “This has to do with the Anarch Peak. My superiors believe that there has been an attempt made to obliterate the Hobart Phase in regard to him — a clear violation of law, and one posing a great danger to society… in that, if successfully done, it would in effect create an immortal person by manipulation of known scientific laws. While we do not oppose the continual attempt to bring about an immortal person by use of the Hobart Phase, we do feel that the Anarch is not the person. If you follow.”

“The Anarch is virtually reabsorbed.” Lehrer did not seem too sympathetic; perhaps, Gantrix decided, he doesn’t believe me. “I see no danger.” Coolly he studied the robot Carl Junior facing him. “If there is a menace it appears to me to lie —”

“Nonsense. I’m here to help you; this is for the library’s benefit, as well as my own.”

“Who do you represent?” Lehrer demanded.

Gantrix hesitated, then said, “Bard Chai of the Supreme Clearness Council. I am following his orders.”

“That puts a different light on matters.” The librarian’s voice had darkened; and, on the vidscreen, his expression had become harder. “I have nothing to do with the Clearness Council; my responsibility goes to the Erads entirely. As you certainly know.”

“But are you aware —”

“I am aware only of this.” Reaching into the drawer of his desk librarian Lehrer brought out a square gray box, which he opened; from it he

produced a typed manuscript which he displayed for Gantrix's attention. "The sole extant copy of HOW I MADE MY OWN SWABBLE OUT OF ORDINARY HOUSEHOLD OBJECTS IN MY BASEMENT DURING MY SPARE TIME . Eng's masterpiece, which borders on the eradicated. You see?"

Gantrix said, "Do you know where Ludwig Eng is, at the moment?"

"I don't care where he is; I only care where he'll be a two-thirty yesterday afternoon — we have an appointment, he and I. Here in this office at section B of the library.

"Where Ludwig Eng will be at two-thirty yesterday," Gantrix said meditatively, half to himself, "depends a good deal on where he is right now." He did not tell the librarian what he knew; that at this moment Ludwig Eng was somewhere in the Free Negro Municipality, possibly trying to obtain audience with the Anarch.

Assuming that the Anarch, in his puerile, diminished state, could still grant audience to anyone.

The now-tiny Anarch, wearing jeans and purple sneakers and a many-times-washed T-shirt, sat on the dusty grass studying intently a ring of marbles. His attention had become so complete that Ludwig Eng felt ready to give up; the boy opposite him no longer seemed conscious of his presence. All in all, the situation depressed Eng; he felt more helpless than before he had come.

Nevertheless, he decided to try to continue. "Your Mightiness," he said, "I only desire a few more moments of your time."

With reluctance the boy looked up. "Yes, sir," he said in a sullen, muted voice.

"My position is difficult," Eng said, repeating himself; he had over and over again presented the childified Anarch with the identical material, and

each time in vain. “If you as Anarch could telecast an appeal throughout the Western United States and the F.N.M. for people to build several swabbles here and there while the last copy of my book still survives —”

“That’s right,” the boy murmured.

“Pardon?” Eng felt a flicker of hope; he watched the small smooth face fixedly. Something had formed there.

Sebastian Peak said, “Yes sir; I hope to become Anarch when I grow up. I’m studying for that right now.”

“You are the Anarch. You *were* the Anarch.” He sighed, feeling crushed. It was clearly hopeless. No point in going on — and today was the final day, because yesterday he would meet with an official from the People’s Topical Library and that would be that.

The boy brightened. He seemed, all at once, to take interest in what Eng had to say. “No kidding?”

“God’s truth, son.” Eng nodded solemnly. “In fact, legally speaking you still hold the office.” He glanced up at the lean Negro with the overly-massive side arm who currently constituted the Anarch’s bodyguard. “Isn’t that so, Mr. Plaut?”

“True, your Mightiness,” the Negro said to the boy. “You possess the power to arbitrate in this case, having to do with this gentleman’s manuscript.” Squatting on his lank haunches the bodyguard sought to engage the boy’s wandering attention. “Your Mightiness, this man is the inventor of the swabble.”

“What’s that?” The boy glanced from one to the other of them, scowling with suspicion. “How much does a swabble cost? I only have fifty cents; I got it as my allowance. Anyhow I don’t think I want a swabble. I want

some gum, and I’m going to the show.” His expression became fixed, rigidly in place. “Who cares about a swabble?” he said with disdain.

“You have lived one hundred and sixty years,” the bodyguard Plaut told him. “Because of this man’s invention. From the swabble the Hobart Phase was inferred and finally established experimentally. I know that means nothing to you, but —” The bodyguard clasped his hands together earnestly, rocking on his hocks as he tried to keep the boy’s constantly dwindling attention focussed. “Pay attention to me, Sebastian; this is important. If you could sign a decree… while you can still write. That’s all. A public notice for people to —”

“Aw, go on; beat it.” The boy glared at him with hostility. “I don’t believe you; something’s the matter.”

Something is wrong, all right, Eng thought to himself as he rose stiffly to his feet. And there appears to be next to nothing that we can do about it. At least without your help. He felt defeated.

“Try him again later,” the bodyguard said, also rising; he looked decidedly sympathetic.

“He’ll be even younger,” Eng said bitterly. And anyhow there was no time; no later existed. He walked a few steps away, then, overcome with gloom.

On a tree branch a butterfly had begun the intricate, mysterious process of squeezing itself into a dull brown cocoon, and Eng paused to inspect its slow, labored efforts. It had its task, too, but that task, unlike his, was not hopeless. However the butterfly did not know that; it continued mindlessly, a reflex machine obeying the urgings programmed into it from the remote future. The sight of the insect at work gave Eng something to ponder; he perceived the moral in it, and, turning, walked back to confront the child who squatted on the grass with his circle of gaily-colored luminous marbles.

“Look at it this way,” he said to the Anarch Peak; this was probably his last try, and he meant to bring in everything available. “Even if you can’t remember what a swabble is or what the Hobart Phase does, all you need to do is sign; I have the document here.” Reaching into his inside coat pocket he brought the envelope out, opened it. “When you’ve signed this, it will appear on worldwide TV, at the six P.M. news in each time zone. I tell you what I’ll do. If you’ll sign this, I’ll triple what you’ve got in the way of money. You say you have fifty cents? I’ll give you an additional dollar, a genuine paper one. What do you say? And I’ll pay your way to the movies once a week, at the Saturday matinee for the balance of the year. Is it a deal?”

The boy studied him acutely. He seemed almost convinced. But something — Eng could not fathom what — held him back.

“I think,” the bodyguard said softly, “he wants to ask his dad’s permission. The old gentleman is now alive; his components migrated into a birth-container about six weeks ago, and he is currently in the Kansas City General Hospital’s birth ward undergoing revivification. He is already conscious, and His Mightiness has spoken with him several times. Is that not so, Sebastian?” He smiled gently at the boy, then grimaced as the boy nodded. “So that is it,” he said to Eng, then. “I was right. He’s afraid to take any initiative, now that his father’s alive. It’s very bad luck as far as you’re concerned, Mr. Eng; he’s just plain dwindled too much to perform his job. And everybody knows it as a fact.”

“I refuse to give up,” Eng said. But the truth of the matter was that purely and simply he had already given up; he could see that the bodyguard, who spent all his waking time with the Anarch, was correct. It had become a waste of time. Had this meeting taken place two years from now, however…

To the bodyguard he said heavily, “I’ll go away and let him play with his marbles.” He placed the envelope back in his pocket, started off; then, pausing, he added, “I’ll make one final try yesterday morning. Before I’m due at the library. If the boy’s schedule permits it.”

“It surely does,” the bodyguard said. He explained, “Hardly anybody consults him any more, in view of his — condition.” His tone was sympathetic, and for that Eng felt appreciation.

Turning wearily he trudged off, leaving the one-time Anarch of half the civilized world to play mindlessly in the grass.

The previous morning, he realized. My last chance. Long time to wait and do nothing.

In his hotel room he placed a phone call to the West Coast, to the People’s Topical Library. Presently he found himself facing one of the bureaucrats with whom, of late, he had had to deal so much. “Let me talk directly to Mr. Lehrer,” he grunted. Might as well go directly to the source, he decided; Lehrer had final authority in the matter of his book — now decayed to a mere typewritten manuscript.

“Sorry,” the functionary told him, with a faint trace of disdain. “It is too early; Mr. Lehrer has already left the building.”

“Could I catch him at home, do you think?”

“He is probably having breakfast. I suggest you wait until late yesterday. After all, Mr. Lehrer needs some time for seclusive recreation; he has many heavy and difficult responsibilities to weigh him down.” Clearly, the minor functionary had no intention of cooperating.

Dully depressed, Eng hung up without even saying hello. Well, perhaps it was for the better; undoubtedly Lehrer would refuse to grant him additional time. After all, as the library bureaucrat had said, Lehrer had pressures at work on him, too: in particular the Erads of the syndicate… those mysterious entities who saw to it that destruction of human inventions be painstakingly carried out. As witness his own book. Well, time to give up and head back west.

As he started from his hotel room, he paused at the mirror of the vanity table to see whether his face had, during the day, absorbed the packet of whiskers which he had foam-glued onto it. Peering at his reflection, he rubbed his jowls…

And screamed.

All along his jaw-line the dark stubble of newly-grown facial hair could be seen. He was growing a beard; stubble was coming in — not being absorbed.

What this meant he did not know. But it terrified him; he stood gaping, appalled now by the fright collected within his reflected features. The man in the mirror did look even vaguely familiar; some ominous underlying deformity of change had attacked it. But why? And — how?

Instinct told him not to leave the hotel room.

He seated himself. And waited. For what, he did not know. But one thing he did know. There would be no meeting with Niehls Lehrer of the People's Topical Library at two-thirty yesterday afternoon. Because —

He scented it, grasped it intuitively from the one single glance in the mirror of his hotel room's vanity table. There would be no yesterday; not for him, anyhow.

Would there be for anyone else?

"I've got to see the Anarch again," he said haltingly to himself. The hell with Lehrer; I don't have any intention of trying to make that or any other appointment with him now. All that matters is seeing Sebastian Peak once more; in fact as soon as it's possible. Perhaps earlier today.

Because once he saw the Anarch he would know whether what he guessed were true. And if it were true, then his book, all at once, lay outside

jeopardy. The syndicate with their inflexible program of eradication no longer menaced him — possibly. At least he hoped so.

But only time would tell. *Time.* The entire Hobart Phase. It was somehow involved.

And — possibly — not just for him.

To his superior Bard Chai of the Clearness Council, Gantrix said, “We were right.” He recycled the tape recorder with shaking hands. “This is from our phone tap, video, to the library; the inventor of the swabble, Ludwig Eng, attempted to reach Lehrer and failed. There was therefore no conversation.”

“Hence nothing to record,” the Bard purred cuttingly. His round green face sagged in pouting disappointment.

“Not so. Look. It is Eng’s image that’s significant. He has spent the day with the Anarch — and as a consequence his age-flow has doubled back upon itself. See with your own eyes.”

After a moment, in which he scrutinized the video image of Eng, the Bard leaned back in his chair, said, “The stigma. Heavy infestation of beard-stubble; certain index in a male, especially of the Cauc persuasion.”

“Shall we rebirth him now?” Gantrix said. “Before he reaches Lehrer?” He had in his possession a superbly made gun which would dwindle any person in a matter of minutes — dwindle him directly into the nearest womb, and for good.

“In my opinion,” Bard Chai said, “he has become harmless. The swabble is nonexistent; this will not restore it.” But within, Bard Chai felt doubt, if not concern. Perhaps Gantrix, his subordinate, correctly perceived the situation; he had done so in the past, on several critical occasions… which explained his current value to the Clearness Council.

“But if the Hobart Phase has been cancelled out for Eng,” Gantrix said doggedly, “then the development of the swabble will start up again. After all, he possesses the original typed manuscript; his contact with the Anarch has taken place before the Eradicators of the syndicate induced the final stage of destruct.”

That certainly was true; Bard Chai pondered and agreed. And yet despite this knowledge he had trouble taking Ludwig Eng seriously; the man did not look dangerous, bearded or otherwise. He turned to Gantrix, began to speak — then abruptly ceased.

“Your expression strikes me as unusual,” Gantrix said, with palpable annoyance. “What’s wrong?” He seemed uneasy, as the Bard’s stare continued. Concern replaced displeasure.

“Your face,” the Bard Chai said, keeping his composure with the greatest of effort.

“What about my face?” Gantrix’s hand flew to his chin; he massaged briefly, then blinked. “My God.”

“*And you have not been near the Anarch.* So that does not explain your condition.” He wondered, then, about himself; had the reversal of the Hobart Phase extended to his own person as well? Swiftly he explored his own jaw-line and dewlap. And distinctly felt burgeoning bristle. Perplexing, he thought wildly to himself. What can account for this? The reversal of the Anarch’s time-path might be only an effect of some prior cause involving them all. This put a new light on the Anarch’s situation; perhaps it had not been voluntary.

“Can it be,” Gantrix said reflectively, “that the disappearance of Eng’s device could explain this? Except for mention in the typewritten manuscript there is no longer any reality connected with the swabble. Actually, we

should have anticipated this, since the swabble is intimately associated with the Hobart Phase."

"I wonder," Bard Chai said, still rapidly pondering. But the swabble had not strictly speaking created the Hobart Phase; it served to direct it, so that certain regions of the planet could evade the Phase entirely — whereas others had become completely mired in it. Still, the disappearance of the swabble from contemporary society must diffuse the Hobart Phase equally over everyone; and an outgrowth of this might be a diminution to beneath the level of effectiveness for those — such as himself and Carl Gantrix — who had participated in the Phase fully.

"But now," Gantrix said thoughtfully, "the inventor of the swabble, and first user of it, has returned to normal time; hence the development of the swabble has again manifested itself. We can expect Eng to build his first working model of the device at any time, now."

The difficulty of Eng's situation had now become apparent to Bard Chai. As before, use of the man's mechanism would spread throughout the world. But — as soon as Eng built and placed in operation his pilot swabble, the Hobart Phase would resume; once more Eng's direction would reverse itself. The swabbles would then be abolished by the syndicate until, once again, all that remained was the original typewritten manuscript — at which point normal time would reestablish itself.

It appeared to Bard Chai that Eng had gotten himself trapped in a closed loop. He would oscillate within a distinct small interval: between possessing only a theoretical account of the swabble and in actuality constructing and operating a functioning model. And tagging along with him would go a good portion of Terra's population.

We are caught with him, Bard Chai realized gloomily. How do we escape? What is our solution?

"We must either force Eng back into complete obliteration of his manuscript, including the idea for the construct," Gantrix said, "or —"

“But that is impossible,” Bard Chai broke in impatiently. “At this point the Hobart Phase weakens automatically, since no working swabbles exist to sustain it. How, in their absence, can Eng be forced backward in time a single step farther?”

It constituted a valid — and answerable — query; both men realized that, and neither spoke for a time. Gantrix morosely continued to rub his jaw, as if he could perceive the steady growth of beard-stubble. Bard Chai, on the other hand, had withdrawn into an intensive introverted state; he pondered and repondered the problem.

No answer came. At least not yet. But, given time —

“This is extremely difficult,” the Bard said, with agitation. “Eng will probably throw together his first swabble at any moment. And once more we will be cycled in a retrograde direction.” What worried him now was one terrible, swift insight. This would occur again and again, and each time the interval would be shortened further. Until, he ruminated, it becomes a stall within a single microsecond; no time-progression in either direction will be able to take place.

A morbid prospect indeed. But one redemptive factor existed. Eng undoubtedly would perceive the problem, too. And he would seek a way out. Logically, it could be solved by him in at least one way: he could voluntarily abstain from inventing the swabble. The Hobart Phase, then, would never assert itself, at least not effectively

But such a decision lay with Ludwig Eng alone. Would he cooperate, if the idea were presented to him?

Probably not. Eng had always been a violent and autistic man; no one could influence him. This, of course, had helped him become an original personality; without this Eng would not have amounted to anything as an inventor, and the swabble, with its enormous effect on contemporary society, would never have come into existence.

Which would have been a good thing, the Bard thought morosely. But until now we could not appreciate this.

He appreciated it now.

The solution which Gantrix had proposed, that of rebirthing Eng, did not appeal to him. But it looked more and more to his eyes as the only way out. And a way out had to be found.

With profound irritation the librarian Niehls Lehrer inspected the clock on his desk, then his appointment book. Eng had not shown up; two-thirty had arrived, and Lehrer sat alone in his office. Carl Gantrix had been correct.

While pondering the meaning of this he heard, dimly, the phone ringing. Probably Eng, he decided as he reached for the receiver. A long way off, phoning in to say that he can't make it. I'll have trouble with this; the syndicate won't like it. And I'll have to alert them; I have no choice.

Into the phone he said, "Goodbye."

"I love you, Niehls." A breathless feminine voice; this was not the call which he had anticipated. "Do you love me?"

"Yes, Charise," he said. "I love you, too. But dammit, don't call me during business hours; I thought you knew that."

Contritely, Charise McFadden said, "Sorry, Niehls. But I keep thinking about poor Lance. Did you do the research on him that you promised? I bet you didn't."

As a matter of fact he had; or more accurately he had instructed a minor employee of the library to do the task for him. Reaching into the top desk drawer he brought out Lance Arbuthnot's folio. "Here it is," he informed Charise. "I know all there is to know about this crank. All I care to know,

more correctly." He leafed among the sheets of paper within the file. "There's not much here, actually. Arbuthnot hasn't *done* much. You understand I can only take time to go into this matter because a major library client has failed — so far — to keep his two-thirty appointment. If he does show up, I'll have to terminate this conversation."

"Did Arbuthnot know the Anarch Peak?"

"That part of his account is true."

"And he is a genuine crank. So eradicating his thesis would be a distinct gain for society. It's your duty." Over the vid portion of the phone she batted her long lashes coaxingly. "Come on, Niehls, dear. Please."

"But," Lehrer continued inflexibly, "there is nothing here suggesting that Arbuthnot spent any time concocting a paper dealing with the psychosomatic aspects of death by meteor-strike."

She colored, hesitated, then said in a low voice, "I, um, made that up."

"Why?"

After a pause, Charise said, falteringly, "Well, h-h-he's — the fact is, I'm his mistress."

"The fact is," Lehrer said boring ahead with ruthless vigor, "you don't really know what his thesis is about. It may be perfectly rational. A significant contribution to our society. Correct?" He did not wait for her reply; reaching, he started to break the phone circuit.

"Wait." She swallowed rapidly, ducked her head, then plunged on as his fingers touched the trip switch of the phone. "All right, Niehls; I admit it. Lance refuses to tell me what his thesis is about. He won't tell anybody. But if you'll undertake to eradicate it — don't you see? He'll have to reveal it to

you; your analysis of it is required before the syndicate accepts it. Isn't that so? And then you'll tell me what it's all about. I know you will."

Lehrer said, "What do you care what it's about?"

"I think," Charise said, hesitating, "it has to do with me. Honest. There's something strange about me, and Lance noticed it. I mean, that's not so unusual when you consider how, um, close we two are; we see so much — if you'll excuse the expression — of each other."

"I find this a dull topic," Lehrer said frigidly. At this point, he said to himself, I wouldn't accept Arbuthnot's thesis at any cost to me. Even if they debited me to the tune often thousand poscreds. "I'll talk to you some other time," he said, and broke the phone circuit.

"Sir," his secretary Miss Tomsen said over the desk intercom, "there's this man out here who's been waiting since six this evening. He says he only wants a second or two of your time, and Miss McFadden led him to understand that you'd be glad to —"

"Tell him I died in office," Lehrer said harshly.

"But you can't die, sir. You're under the Hobart Phase. And Mr. Arbuthnot knows that, because he mentioned it. He's been sitting out here doing a Hobart type horoscope on you, and he predicts that great things have happened to you during the previous year. Frankly he makes me nervous; some of his predictions sound so accurate."

"Fortune-telling about the past doesn't interest me," Lehrer said. "In fact, as far as I'm concerned, it's a hoax. Only the future is knowable." The man is a crank, all right, Lehrer realized. Charise told me the truth in that respect. Imagine maintaining in all seriousness that what has already happened, what has vanished into the limbo of nebulous yesterday, can be predicted. There's one killed every minute, as P.T. Barnum phrased it.

Maybe I should see him, he reflected. Charise is right; ideas like this ought to be eradicated for the good of mankind, if not for my own peace of mind.

But that was not all. Now a measure of curiosity overcame him. It would be interesting, in a feeble way, to hear the idiot out. See what he predicted, especially for the recent few weeks. And then accept his thesis for eradication. Be the first person he casts a Hobart type of horoscope for.

Undoubtedly, Ludwig Eng did not intend to show up. The time, Lehrer said to himself, must be two o'clock by now. He glanced at his wristwatch. And blinked.

The watch hands semaphored two-forty.

"Miss Tomsen," Lehrer said into the intercom, "What time do you have?"

"Leaping J. Lizards," Miss Tomsen said. "It's earlier than I thought. I distinctly recall it being two-twenty just a moment ago. My watch must have stopped."

"You mean it's later than you thought. Two-forty is later than two-thirty."

"No sir, if you don't resent my disagreeing with you. I mean, it's not my place to tell *you* what's what, but I am right. You can ask anybody. I'll ask this gentleman out here. Mr. Arbuthnot, isn't two-forty earlier than two-twenty?"

Over the intercom speaker came a masculine voice, dry and controlled. "I'm only interested in seeing Mr. Lehrer, not in holding academic discussions. Mr. Lehrer, if you will see me, I guarantee you'll find my thesis the most flagrant piece of outright trash you've ever had brought to your attention; Miss McFadden will not mislead you."

“Send him in,” Lehrer reluctantly instructed Miss Tomsen. He felt perplexed. Something weird had begun to happen, something which was connected with the orderly flow of time. But he could not make out precisely what.

A dapper young man, in the first stages of baldness, entered the office, a briefcase under his arm. He and Lehrer briefly shook and then Arbuthnot seated himself facing the desk.

So this is the man Charise is having an affair with, Lehrer said to himself. Well, so it goes. “I’ll give you ten minutes,” he stated. “And then you’re out of here. You understand?”

“I have concocted here,” Arbuthnot said, unzipping his briefcase, “the most outrageously impossible concept imaginable to my mind. And I think official eradication is absolutely essential, here, if this idea is to be kept from taking root and doing actual outright harm. There are people who pick up and act on any idea, no matter how contrary to rational good sense. You’re the only person I’ve shown this to, and I show it to you with grave reservations.” Arbuthnot then, in one brisk and spasmodic motion, dropped his typewritten work on the surface of Niehls Lehrer’s desk. And sat back, waiting.

With professional caution, Lehrer surveyed the title of the paper, then shrugged. “This is nothing more than an inversion of Ludwig Eng’s famous work.” He slid his castered chair back from the desk, disavowing the manuscript; raising both hands he gestured in dismissal. “This is not so preposterous; it’s logically thinkable to reverse Eng’s title — anybody could do it at any time.”

Arbuthnot said grimly, “But no one has. Until now. Read it once again and think out the implications.”

Unimpressed, Lehrer once more examined the thick bundle of pages.

“The implications,” Arbuthnot continued in a low, quiet, but tense voice, “of the eradication of this manuscript.”

The title, still unimpressive to Lehrer, read:

HOW I DISASSEMBLED MY SWABBLE

INTO ORDINARY HOUSEHOLD OBJECTS IN MY BASEMENT

DURING MY SPARE TIME

“So?” Lehrer said. “Anyone can disassemble a swabble; in fact it’s being done. In fact, thousands of swabbles are being eradicated; it’s the pattern. In fact, I doubt whether a single swabble is now to be found anywhere in —”

“When this thesis is eradicated,” Arbuthnot said, “as I am certain it has been, and recently, what will the negation consist of? Think it out, Lehrer. You know the implications of cleaning out of existence Eng’s premise; it means the end of the swabble and therefore the Hobart Phase. In fact, we’ll see a return to normal time-flow throughout the Western United States and the Free Negro Municipality within the past forty-eight hours… as Eng’s manuscript nears syndicate jurisdiction. The eradication of my work, then, if you follow the same line of reasoning —” He paused, “You see what I’ve done, don’t you? I’ve found a way to preserve the swabble. And to maintain the now-disintegrating Hobart Phase, Without my thesis we’ll gradually lose all that the swabble has brought us. The swabble, Lehrer, eliminates death; the case of the Anarch Peak is only the beginning. But the only way to keep the cycle alive is to balance Eng’s paper with mine; Eng’s paper moves us in one direction; my paper reverses it, and then Eng’s becomes operative once more. Forever, if we want it. Unless — and I can’t imagine this happening, although admittedly it is theoretically possible — a hopeless fusion of the two time-flows results.”

“You’re a crank,” Lehrer said thickly.

“Exactly.” Arbuthnot nodded. “And that’s why you’ll accept my paper for official syndicate eradication. *Because you don’t believe me.* Because

you think this is absurd.” He smiled slightly, his eyes gray, intelligent and penetrating. Pressing the on-button of his intercom, Lehrer said, “Miss Tomsen, notify the local outlet of the syndicate that I’d like an Erad sent to my office as soon as possible. I have some junk here that I want him to rule on. So we can begin the business of terminal copy extinction.”

“Yes, Mr. Lehrer,” Miss Tomsen’s voice said.

Leaning back in his chair, Lehrer surveyed the man seated across from him. “Does that suit you?”

Still smiling, Arbuthnot said, “Perfectly.”

“If I thought there was anything in your concept —”

“But you don’t,” Arbuthnot said patiently. “So I’m going to get what I want; I’ll be successful. Sometime tomorrow or at the latest the day after.”

“You mean yesterday,” Lehrer said. “Or the day before.” He examined his wristwatch. “The ten minutes are up,” he informed the crank inventor. “I’ll ask you now to leave.” He placed his hand on the bundle of papers. “This stays here.”

Rising, Arbuthnot moved toward the door of the office. “Mr. Lehrer,” he said, pausing, “don’t be alarmed by this, but with all due respects, sir, you need a shave.”

“I haven’t shaved in twenty-three years,” Lehrer said. “Not since the Hobart Phase first took effect in my area of Los Angeles.”

“You will by this time tomorrow,” Arbuthnot said. And left the office; the door shut after him.

After a moment of reflection, Lehrer touched the button of the intercom. “Miss Tomsen, don’t send anyone else in here; I’m cancelling my

appointments for the balance of the day."

"Yes sir." Hopefully, Miss Tomsen said, "He was a crank, wasn't he? I thought so; I can always tell. You're glad you saw him."

"Will see him," he corrected.

"I think you're mistaken, Mr. Lehrer. The past tense —"

"Even if Ludwig Eng shows up," Lehrer said, "I don't feel like seeing him. I've had enough for today." Opening his desk drawer he carefully deposited Arbuthnot's manuscript within it, then shut it once more. He reached toward the ash tray on the desk, selected the shortest — and hence best — cigarette butt, dabbed it against the ceramic surface until it began to burn, then lifted it to his lips. Puffing shreds of tobacco into it, he sat staring fixedly out the office window at the poplar trees that lined the walk to the parking lot.

The wind, rushing about, gathered up a quantity of leaves, swirled them onto the branches of the trees, adhered them in a neat arrangement which decidedly added to the beauty of the trees.

Already, some of the brown leaves had turned green. In a short while autumn would give way to summer, and summer to spring.

He watched appreciatively. As he waited for the Erad sent out by the syndicate. Due to the crank's deranged thesis, time had once more returned to normal. Except —

Lehrer rubbed his chin. Bristles. He frowned.

"Miss Tomsen," he said into the intercom, "will you step in here and tell me whether or not I need a shave?"

He had a feeling that he did. And soon.

Probably within the previous half hour.

Holy Quarrel

I

Sleep dissolved; he blinked as a dazzle of white artificial light hurt him. The light came from three rings which held a fixed location above the bed, midway to the ceiling.

"Sorry to wake you, Mr. Stafford," a man's voice came from beyond the light. "You are Joseph Stafford, aren't you?" Then, speaking to someone else, also unseen, the voice continued, "Would be a damn shame to wake somebody else up — somebody who didn't deserve it."

Stafford sat up and croaked, "Who are you?"

The bed creaked and one circle of light lowered. One of them had seated himself. "We're looking for Joseph Stafford, of tier six, floor fifty, who's the — what do you call it?"

"Computer GB-class repairman," a companion assisted him.

"Yes, an expert, for example, in those new molten-plasma data storage cans. You could fix one like that if it broke, couldn't you, Stafford?"

"Sure he could," another voice said calmly. "That's why he's rated as standby." He explained, "That second vidphone line we cut did that; it kept him directly connected with his superiors."

"How long has it been since you got a call, repairman?" the first voice inquired.

Stafford did not answer; he fished beneath the pillow of the bed, groped for the Sneek gun he generally kept there.

"Probably hasn't worked for a long time," one of the visitors with flashlight said. "Probably needs the money. You need any money, Stafford? Or what *do* you need? You enjoy fixing computers? I mean, you'd be a sap to enter this line of work unless you liked it — with you on twenty-four-hour standby like it is. Are you good? Can you fix anything, no matter how ridiculous and remote it is, that happens to our Genux-B military planning programmer? Make us feel good; say yes."

"I — have to think," Stafford said thickly. He still searched for the gun, but he had lost it; he felt its absence. Or possibly before awakening him they had taken it.

"Tell you what, Stafford," the voice went on.

Interrupting, another voice said, "*Mr.* Stafford. Listen." The far right nimbus of light also lowered; the man had bent over him. "Get out of bed, okay? Get dressed and we'll drive you to where we need a computer fixed, and on the way when you have plenty of time you can decide how good you are. And then when we get there you can have a quick look at the Genux-B and see how long it'll take you."

"We really want it fixed up," the first man said plaintively. "As it is, it's no good to us or anyone. The way it is now, data are piling up in mile-high mounds. And they're not being — what do you say? — ingested. They just sit there, and Genux-B doesn't process them, so naturally it can't come up with any decision. So naturally all those satellites are just flying along there like nothing happened."

Getting slowly, stiffly from the bed, Stafford said, "What showed up first as a symptom?" He wondered who they were. And he wondered which Genux-B they were talking about. As far as he knew, there existed only three in North America — only eight throughout Terra.

Watching him get into his work smock, the invisible shapes behind the flashlights conferred. At last one cleared his throat and said, “I understand that a tape take-up reel stopped spinning, so all the tape with all the data on it just keeps spinning onto the floor in a big heap.”

“But tape tension on the take-up reels —” Stafford began.

“In this case, it failed to be automatic. You see, we jammed the reel so it wouldn’t accept any more tape. Before that we tried cutting the tape, but as I guess you know it rethreads itself automatically. And we tried erasing the tape, but if the erase circuit comes on it starts an alarm going in Washington, D.C., and we didn’t want to get all those high-level people involved. But they — the computer designers — overlooked the take-up reel tension because that’s such a simple clutch arrangement. It can’t go wrong.”

Trying to button his collar, Stafford said, “In other words, there’re data you don’t want it to receive.” He felt lucid now; at least he had more or less wakened up. “What kind of data?” He thought with chill foreboding that he knew. Data were coming in which would cause the big government-owned computer to declare a Red Alert. Of course, this crippling of Genux-B would have to occur before a hostile attack by the South African True Association manifested itself in real but minute individual symptoms which the computer, with its vast intake of seemingly unrelated data, would take note of — notice and add together into a meaningful pattern.

Stafford thought bitterly, How many times we were warned about this! They would have to wipe out our Genux-B prior to its successful deploying of the SAC retaliatory satellites and bombers. And this was that event; these men, undercover extensions in North America of S.A.T.A., had rousted him to complete their job of making the computer inoperable.

But — data might already have been received, might already have been transferred to the receptor circuits for processing and analysis. They had started to work too late; possibly by one day, possibly only by a few

seconds. At least some of the meaningful data had gotten onto the tapes, and so *he* had to be called in. They couldn't finish their job alone.

The United States, then, would presently undergo a series of terror-weapon satellites bursting above it — as meantime the network of defensive machinery waited for a command from the cardinal computer. Waited in vain, since Genux-B knew of no trace harbingers of military assault — would still not ever really know until a direct hit on the national capital put an end to it and its emasculated faculties.

No wonder they had jammed the take-up reel.

II

“The war’s begun,” he said quietly to the four men with flashlights.

Now that he had turned on the bedroom lamps, he could make them out. Ordinary men with an assigned task; these were not fanatics but functionaries. They could have worked equally well for any government, perhaps even the near-psychotic Chinese People’s. “The war has *already* broken out,” he guessed aloud, “and it’s essential that Genux-B not know — so it can neither defend us nor strike back. You want to see it get only data which indicate we’re at peace.” He — and no doubt they — recalled how swiftly in the two previous Interventions of Honor, one against Israel, one against France, Genux-B had reacted. Not one trained professional observer had seen the signs — or had seen to what the signs led, anyhow. As with Josef Stalin in 1941. The old tyrant had been shown evidence that the Third Reich intended to attack the U.S.S.R., but he simply would not or could not believe. Any more than the Reich had believed that France and Britain, in 1939, would honor their pact with Poland.

In a compact group, the men with flashlights led him from the bedroom of his conapt, into the outer hall and to the escy which led to the roof field. As they emerged, the air smelled of mud and dampness. He inhaled, shivered, and involuntarily gazed up at the sky. One star moved: landing light on a flapple, which now set down a few feet from the five of them.

As they sat within the flapple — rising swiftly from the roof and heading toward Utah to the west — one of the gray functionaries with Sneek gun, flashlight, and briefcase said to Stafford, “Your theory is good, especially considering that we woke you out of a sound sleep.”

“But,” a companion put in, “it’s wrong. Show him the punched tape we hauled out.”

Opening his briefcase, the man nearest Stafford brought out a wad of plastic tape, handed it mutely to Stafford.

Holding it up against the dome light of the flapple, Stafford made out the punches. Binary system, evidently programming material for the Strategic Acquired-Space Command units which the computer directly controlled.

“It was about to push the panic button and give them an order,” the man at the console of the flapple said, over his shoulder. “To all our military units linked to it. Can you read the command?”

Stafford nodded, and returned the tape. He could read it, yes. The computer had formally notified SAC of a Red Alert. It had gone so far as to move H-bomb-carrying squadrons into scramble, and also was requesting that all ICBM missiles on their assorted pads be made ready for launch.

“And also,” the man at the controls added, “it was sending out a command to defensive satellites and missile complexes to deploy themselves in response to an imminent H-bomb attack. We blocked all this, however, as you now are able to see. None of this tape got onto the co-ax lines.”

After a pause, Stafford said huskily, “Then what data don’t you want Genux-B to receive?” He did not understand.

“Feedback,” said the man at the controls. Obviously he was the leader of this unit of commandos. “Without feedback the computer does not possess any method of determining that there has been no counterattack by its military arm. In the abeyance it will have to assume that the counterattack has taken place, but that the enemy strike was at least partially successful.”

Stafford said, “But there is no enemy. Who’s attacking us?”

Silence.

Sweat made Stafford's forehead slick with moisture. "Do you know what would cause a Genux-B to conclude that we're under attack? A million separate factors, all possible known data weighed, compared, analyzed — and then the absolute gestalt. In this case, the gestalt of an imminent attacking enemy. No one thing would have raised the threshold; it was quantitative. A shelter-building program in Asiatic Russia, unusual movements of cargo ships around Cuba, concentrations of rocket freight unloadings in Red Canada…"

"No one," the man at the controls of the flapple said placidly, "no nation or group of persons either on Terra or Luna or Domed Mars is attacking anybody. You can see why we've got to get you over there fast. You have to make it absolutely certain that no orders emanate from Genux-B to SAC. We want Genux-B sealed off so it can't talk to anybody in a position of authority and it can't hear anybody besides us. What we do after that we'll worry about then. 'But the evil of the day —' "

"You assert that in spite of everything available to it, Genux-B can't distinguish an attack on us?" Stafford demanded. "With its manifold data-collecting sweepers?" He thought of something then, that terrified him in a kind of hopeless, retrospective way. "What about our attack on France in '82 and then on little Israel in '89?"

"No one was attacking us then either," the man nearest Stafford said, as he retrieved the tape and again placed it within his briefcase. His voice, somber and morose, was the only sound; no one else stirred or spoke. "Same then as now. Only this time a group of us stopped Genux-B before it could commit us. We pray we've aborted a pointless, needless war."

"Who are you?" Stafford asked. "What's your status in the federal government? And what's your connection with Genux-B?" Agents, he thought, of the Blunk-rattling South African True Association. That still struck him as most likely. Or even zealots from Israel, looking for

vengeance — or merely acting out the desire to stop a war: the most humanitarian motivation conceivable.

But, nevertheless, he himself, like Genux-B, was under a loyalty oath to no larger political entity than the North American Prosperity Alliance. He still had the problem of getting away from these men and to his chain-of-command superiors so that he could file a report.

The man at the controls of the flapple said, “Three of us are FBI.” He displayed credentials. “And that man there is an eleccom engineer, who, as a matter of fact, helped in the original design of this particular Genux-B.”

“That’s right,” the engineer said. “I personally made it possible for them to jam both the outgoing programming and the incoming data feed. But that’s not enough.” He turned toward Stafford, his face serene, his eyes large and inviting. He was half-begging, half-ordering, using whatever tone would bring results. “But let’s be realistic. Every Genux-B has backup monitoring circuitry that’ll begin to inform it any time now that its programming to SAC isn’t being acted on, and in addition it’s not getting the data it ought to get. As with everything else it sinks its electronic circuits into, it’ll begin to introspect. And by that time we have to be doing something better than jamming a take-up reel with a Phillips screwdriver.” He paused. “So,” he finished more slowly, “that’s why we came to you.”

Gesturing, Stafford said, “I’m just a repairman. Maintenance and service — not even malfunct analysis. I do only what I’m told.”

“Then do what we’re telling you,” the FBI man closest to him spoke up harshly. “Find out *why* Genux-B decided to flash a Red Alert, scramble SAC, and begin a ‘counterattack.’ Find out why it did so in the case of France and Israel. Something made it add up its received data and get that answer. It’s not alive! It has no volition. It didn’t just *feel* the urge to do this.”

The engineer said, “If we’re lucky, this is the last time Genux-B will malreact in this fashion. If we can spot the misfunction this time, we’ll

perhaps have it pegged for all time. Before it starts showing up in the other seven Genux-B systems around the world."

"And you're certain," Stafford said, "that we're *not* under attack?" Even if Genux-B had been wrong both times before, it at least theoretically could be right this time.

"If we are about to be attacked," the nearest FBI man said, "we can't make out any indication of it — by human data processing, anyhow. I admit it's logically thinkable that Genux-B could be correct. After all, as he pointed out —"

"You may be in error because the S.A.T.A. has been hostile toward us so long we take it for granted. It's a verity of modern life."

"Oh, it's not the South African True Association," the FBI man said briskly. "In fact, if it were we wouldn't have gotten suspicious. We wouldn't have begun poking around, interviewing survivors from the Israel War and French War and whatever else State's done to follow this up."

"It's Northern California," the engineer said, and grimaced. "Not even all of California; just the part above Pismo Beach."

Stafford stared at them.

"That's right," one of the FBI men said. "Genux-B was in the process of scrambling all SAC bombers and wep-sats for an all-out assault on the area around Sacramento, California."

"You asked it why?" Stafford said, speaking to the engineer.

"Sure. Or rather, strictly speaking, we asked it to spell out in detail what the 'enemy' is up to."

One of the FBI men drawled, “Tell Mr. Stafford what Northern California is up to that makes it a hot-target enemy — that would have meant its destruction by SAC spearhead assaults if we hadn’t jammed the damn machinery… and still have it jammed.”

“Some individual,” the engineer said, “has opened up a penny gum machine route in Castro Valley. You know. He has those bubble-headed dispensers outside supermarkets. The children put in a penny and get a placebo ball of gum and something additional occasionally - a prize such as a ring or a charm. It varies. That’s the target.”

Incredulous, Stafford said, “You’re joking.”

“Absolute truth. Man’s name is Herb Sousa. He owns sixty-four machines now in operation and plans expansion.”

“I mean,” Stafford said thickly, “you’re joking about Genux-B’s response to that datum.”

“Its response isn’t exactly to that datum per se,” the closest of the FBI men said. “For instance, we checked with both the Israeli and French governments. Nobody named Herb Sousa opened up a penny gum machine route in their countries, and that goes for chocolate-covered peanut vending machines or anything else remotely similar to it. And, contrarily, Herb Sousa maintained such a route in Chile and in the U.K. during the past two decades… without Genux-B taking any interest all those years.” He added, “He’s an elderly man.”

“A sort of Johnny Apple Gum,” the engineer said, and tittered. “Looping the world, sending those gum machines swooping down in front of every gas —”

“The triggering stimulus,” the engineer said, as the flapple began to drop toward a vast complex of illuminated public buildings below, “may lie in the ingredients of the merchandise placed in the machines. That’s what

our experts have come up with; they studied all material available to Genux-B concerning Sousa's gum concessions, and we know that all Genux-B has consists of a long, dry chemical analysis of the food product constituents with which Sousa loads his machines. In fact, Genux-B specifically *requested* more information on that angle. It kept grinding out 'incomplete ground data' until we got a thorough PF&D lab analysis."

"What did the analysis show?" Stafford asked. The flapple had now berthed on the roof of the installations housing the central component of the computer, and, as it was called these days, Mr. C-in-C of the North American Prosperity Alliance.

"As regards foodstuffs," an FBI man near the door said, as he stepped out onto the dimly illuminated landing strip, "nothing but gum base, sugar, corn syrup, softeners, and artificial flavor, all the way down the line. Matter of fact, that's the only way you *can* make gum. And those dinky little prizes are vacuum-processed thermoplastics. Six hundred to the dollar will buy them from any of a dozen firms here and in Hong Kong and Japan. We even went so far as to trace the prizes down to the specific jobber, his sources, back to the factory, where a man from State actually stood and watched them making the damn little things. No, nothing there. Nothing at all."

"But," the engineer said, half to himself, "when that data had been supplied to Genux-B —"

"Then this," the FBI man said, standing aside so that Stafford could disemflapple. "A Red Alert, the SAC scramble, the missiles up from their silos. Forty minutes away from thermonuclear war — the distance from us of one Phillips head screwdriver wedged in a tape drum of the computer."

To Stafford, the engineer said keenly, "Do you pick up anything odd or conceivably misleading in those data? Because if you do, for God's sake speak up; all we can do this way is to dismantle Genux-B and put it out of action, so that when a genuine threat faces us —"

“I wonder,” Stafford said slowly, pondering, “what’s meant by ‘artificial’ color.”

III

“It means it won’t otherwise look the right color, so a harmless food-coloring dye is added,” the engineer said presently.

“But that’s the one ingredient,” Stafford said, “that isn’t listed in a way that tells us what it is — only what it does. And how about flavor?” The FBI men glanced at one another.

“It is a fact,” one of them said, “and I recall this because it always makes me sore — it did specify artificial flavor. But heck —”

“Artificial color and flavor,” Stafford said, “could mean anything. Anything over and above the color and flavor imparted.” He thought: Isn’t it prussic acid that turns everything a bright clear green? That, for example, could in all honesty be spelled out on a label as “artificial color.” And taste — what really was meant by “artificial taste”? This to him always had a dark, peculiar quality to it, this thought; he decided to shelve it. Time now to go down and take a look at Genux-B, to see what damage had been done to it. — And how much damage, he thought wryly, it still needs. If I’ve been told the truth; if these men are what they show credentials for, not S.A.T.A. saboteurs or an intelligence cadre of one of several major foreign powers.

From the garrison warrior domain of Northern California, he thought wryly. Or was that absolutely impossible after all? Perhaps something genuine and ominous had burgeoned into life there. And Genux-B had — as designed to do — sniffed it out.

For now, he could not tell.

But perhaps by the time he finished examining the computer he would know. In particular, he wanted to see firsthand the authentic, total collection

of data tapes currently being processed from the outside universe into the computer's own inner world. Once he knew that —

I'll turn the thing back on, he said grimly to himself. I'll do the job I was trained for and hired to do.

Obviously, for him it would be easy. He thoroughly knew the schematics of the computer. No one else had been into it replacing defective components and wiring as had he.

This explained why these men had come to him. They were right — at least about that.

"Piece of gum?" one of the FBI agents asked him as they walked to the descy with its phalanx of uniformed guards standing at parade rest before it. The FBI agent, a burly man with a reddish fleshy neck, held out three small brightly colored spheres.

"From one of Sousa's machines?" the engineer asked.

"Sure is." The agent dropped them into Stafford's smock pocket, then grinned. "Harmless? Yes-no-maybe, as the college tests say."

Retrieving one from his pocket, Stafford examined it in the overhead light of the descy. Sphere, he thought. Egg. Fish egg; they're round, as in caviar. Also edible; no law against selling brightly colored eggs. Or are they laid this color?

"Maybe it'll hatch," one of the FBI men said casually. He and his companions had become tense now, as they descended into the high-security portion of the building.

"What do you think would hatch out of it?" Stafford said.

"A bird," the shortest of the FBI men said brusquely. "A tiny red bird bringing good tidings of great joy."

Both Stafford and the engineer glanced at him.

“Don’t quote the Bible to me,” Stafford said. “I was raised with it. I can quote you back anytime.” But it was strange, in view of his own immediate thoughts, almost an occurrence of synchronicity between their minds. It made him feel more somber. God knew, he felt somber enough as it was. Something laying eggs, he thought. Fish, he reflected, release thousands of eggs, all identical; only a very few of them survive. Impossible waste — a terrible, primitive method.

But if eggs were laid and deposited all over the world, in countless public places, even if only a fraction survived — it would be enough. This had been proved. The fish of Terra’s waters had done so. If it worked for terran life, it could work for nonterran, too.

The thought did not please him.

“If you wanted to infest Terra,” the engineer said, seeing the expression on his face, “and your species, from God knows what planet in what solar system, reproduced the way our cold-blooded creatures here on Terra reproduce —” He continued to eye Stafford. “In other words, if you spawned thousands, even millions of small hard-shelled eggs, and you didn’t want them noticed, and they were bright in color as eggs generally are —” he hesitated. “One wonders about incubation. How long. And under what circumstances? Fertilized eggs, to hatch, *generally have to be kept warm*.”

“In a child’s body,” Stafford said, “it would be very warm.”

And the thing, the egg, would — insanely — pass Pure Food & Drug standards. There was nothing toxic in an egg. All organic, and very nourishing.

Except, of course, that if this happened to be so, the outer shell of hard colored “candy” would be immune to the action of normal stomach juices.

The egg would not dissolve. But it could be chewed up in the mouth, though. Surely it wouldn't survive mastication. It would have to be swallowed like a pill: intact.

With his teeth he bit down on the red ball and cracked it. Retrieving the two hemispheres, he examined the contents.

"Ordinary gum," the engineer said. " 'Gum base, sugar, corn syrup, softeners -' " He grinned tauntingly, and yet in his face a shadow of relief passed briefly across before it was, by an effort of will, removed. "False lead."

"False lead, and I'm glad it is," the shortest of the FBI men said. He stepped from the descy. "Here we are." He stopped in front of the rank of uniformed and armed guards, showed his papers. "We're back," he told the guards.

"The prizes," Stafford said.

"What do you mean?" the engineer glanced at him.

"It's not in the gum. So it has to be in the prizes, the charms and knickknacks. That's all that's left."

"What you're doing," the engineer said, "is implicitly maintaining that Genux-B is functioning properly. That it's somehow right; there *is* a hostile warlike menace to us. One so great it justifies pacification of Northern California by hard first-line weapons. As I see it, isn't it easier simply to operate from the fact that the computer is malfunctioning?"

Stafford, as they walked down the familiar corridors of the vast government building, said, "Genux-B was built to sift a greater amount of data simultaneously than any man or group of men could. It handles more data than we, and it handles them faster. Its response comes in microseconds. If Genux-B, after analyzing all the current data, feels that

war is indicated, and we don't agree, then it may merely show that the computer is functioning *as it was intended to function.* And the more we disagree with it, the better this is proved. If we could perceive, as it does, the need for immediate, aggressive war on the basis of the data available, *then we wouldn't require Genux-B.* It's precisely in a case like this, where the computer has given out a Red Alert and we see no menace, that the real use of a computer of this class comes into play."

After a pause, one of the FBI men said, as if speaking to himself, "He's right, you know. Absolutely right. The real question is, Do we trust Genux-B more than ourselves? Okay, we built it to analyze faster and more accurately and on a wider scale than we can. If it had been a success, this situation we face now is precisely what could have been predicted. *We* see no cause for launching an attack; it does." He grinned harshly. "So what do we do? Start Genux-B up again, have it go ahead and program SAC into a war? Or do we neutralize it — in other words, unmake it?" His eyes were cold and alert on Stafford. "A decision one way or the other has to be made by someone. Now. At once. Someone who can make a good educated guess as to which it is, functioning or malfunctioning."

"The President and his cabinet," Stafford offered tensely. "An ultimate decision like this has to be his. He bears the moral responsibility."

"But the decision," the engineer spoke up, "is not a moral question, Stafford. It only *looks* like it is. Actually the question is only a technical one. Is Genux-B working properly or has it broken down?"

And that's why you rousted me from bed, Stafford realized with a thrill of icy dismal grief. You didn't bring me here to implement your jerry-built jamming of the computer. Genux-B could be neutralized by one shell from one rocket launcher towed up and parked outside the building. In fact, he realized, in all probability it's effectively neutralized now. You can keep that Phillips screwdriver wedged in there forever. And you helped design and build the thing. No, he realized, that's not it. I'm not here to repair or destroy; *I'm here to decide.* Because I've been physically close to Genux-B for fifteen years — it's supposed to confer some mystic intuitive ability on

me to sense whether the thing is functioning or malfunctioning. I'm supposed to hear the difference, like a good garage mechanic who can tell merely by listening to a turbine engine whether it has bearing knock or not, and if so how bad.

A diagnosis, he realized. That's all you want. This is a consultation of computer doctors — and one repairman.

The decision evidently lay with the repairman, because the others had given up.

He wondered how much time he had. Probably very little. Because if the computer were correct —

Sidewalk gum machines, he pondered. Penny-operated. For kids. And for that it's willing to pacify all Northern California. What could it possibly have extrapolated? What, looking ahead, did Genux-B see?

It amazed him: the power of one small tool to halt the workings of a mammoth constellation of autonomic processes. But the Phillips screwdriver had been inserted expertly.

"What we must try," Stafford said, "is introduction of calculated, experimental — and false — data." He seated himself at one of the typewriters wired directly to the computer. "Let's start off with this," he said, and began to type.

HERB SOUSA, OF SACRAMENTO, CALIFORNIA, THE GUM MACHINE MAGNATE, DIED SUDDENLY IN HIS SLEEP. A LOCAL DYNASTY HAS COME TO AN UNANTICIPATED END.

Amused, one of the FBI men said, "You think it'll believe that?"

"It always believes its data," Stafford said. "It has no other source to rely on."

“But if the data conflict,” the engineer pointed out, “it’ll analyze everything out and accept the most probable chain.”

“In this case,” Stafford said, “nothing will conflict with this datum because this is all Genux-B is going to receive.” He fed the punched card to Genux-B then, and stood waiting. “Tap the outgoing signal,” he instructed the engineer. “Watch to see if it cuts off.”

One of the FBI men said, “We already have a line splice, so that ought to be easy to do.” He glanced at the engineer, who nodded.

Ten minutes later the engineer, now wearing headphones, said, “No change. The Red Alert is still being emitted; that didn’t affect it.”

“Then it has nothing to do with Herb Sousa as such,” Stafford said, pondering. “Or else he’s done it — whatever it is — already. Anyhow, his death means nothing to Genux-B. We’ll have to look somewhere else.” Again seating himself at the typewriter, he began on his second spurious fact.

IT HAS BEEN LEARNED, ON THE ADVICE OF RELIABLE SOURCES IN BANKING AND FINANCIAL CIRCLES IN NORTHERN CALIFORNIA, THAT THE CHEWING GUM EMPIRE OF THE LATE HERB SOUSA WILL BE BROKEN UP TO PAY OUTSTANDING DEBTS. ASKED WHAT WOULD BE DONE WITH THE GUM AND TRINKETS CONSTITUTING THE GOODIES WITHIN EACH MACHINE, LAW-ENFORCEMENT OFFICERS HAZARDED THE GUESS THAT THEY WOULD BE DESTROYED AS SOON AS A COURT ORDER, NOW BEING SOUGHT BY THE ASSISTANT DISTRICT ATTORNEY OF SACRAMENTO, CAN BE PUT INTO EFFECT.

Ceasing typing, he sat back, waiting. No more Herb Sousa, he said to himself, and no more merchandise. What does that leave? Nothing. The man and his commodities, at least as far as Genux-B was concerned, no longer existed.

Time passed; the engineer continued to monitor the output signal of the computer. At last, resignedly, he shook his head. “No change.”

“I have one more spurious datum I want to feed it,” Stafford said. Again he put a card in the typewriter and began to punch.

IT APPEARS NOW THAT THERE NEVER WAS AN INDIVIDUAL NAMED HERBERT SOUSA; NOR DID THIS MYTHOLOGICAL PERSON EVER GO INTO THE PENNY GUM MACHINE BUSINESS.

As he rose to his feet, Stafford said, “That should cancel out everything Genux-B knows or ever did know about Sousa and his penny-ante operation.” As far as the computer was concerned, the man had been retroactively expunged.

In which case, how could the computer initiate war against a man who had never existed, who operated a marginal concession which also never existed?

A few moments later the engineer, tensely monitoring the output signal of Genux-B, said, “Now there’s been a change.” He studied his oscilloscope, then accepted the reel of tape being voided by the computer and began a close inspection of that, too.

For a time he remained silent, intent on the job of reading the tape; then all at once he glanced up and grinned humorously at the rest of them.

He said, “It says that the datum is a lie.”

IV

“A lie!” Stafford said unbelievingly.

The engineer said, “It’s discarded the last datum on the grounds that it can’t be true. It contradicts what it knows to be valid. In other words, *it still knows that Herb Sousa exists.* Don’t ask me how it knows this; probably it’s an evaluation from wide-spectrum data over an extensive period of time.” He hesitated, then said, “Obviously, it knows more about Herb Sousa then we do.”

“It knows, anyhow, that there is such a person,” Stafford conceded. He felt nettled. Often in the past Genux-B had spotted contradictory or inaccurate data and had expelled them. But it had never mattered this much before.

He wondered, then, what prior, unassailable body of data existed within the memory-cells of Genux-B against which it had compared his spurious assertion of Sousa’s nonexistence.

“What it must be doing,” he said to the engineer, “is to go on the assumption if if X is true, that Sousa never existed, then Y must be true — whatever ‘Y’ is. But Y remains untrue. I wish we knew which of all its millions of data units Y is.”

They were back to their original problem: Who was Herb Sousa and what had he done to alert Genux-B into such violent sine qua non activity?

“Ask it,” the engineer said to him.

“Ask what?” He was puzzled.

“Instruct it to produce its stored data inventory on Herb Sousa. All of it.” The engineer kept his voice deliberately patient. “God knows what it’s sitting on. And once we get it, let’s look it over and see if *we* can spot what it spotted.”

Typing the proper requisition, Stafford fed the card to Genux-B.

“It reminds me,” one of the FBI men said reflectively, “of a philosophy course I took at U.C.L.A. There used to be an ontological argument to prove the existence of God. You imagine what He would be like, if He existed: omnipotent, omnipresent, omniscient, immortal, plus being capable of infinite justice and mercy.”

“So?” the engineer said irritably.

“Then, when you’ve imagined Him possessing all those ultimate qualities, you notice that He lacks one quality. A minor one - a quality which every germ and stone and piece of trash by the freeway possesses. Existence. So you say: If He has all those others, He must possess the attribute of being real. If a stone can do it, obviously He can.” He added, “It’s a discarded theory; they knocked it down back in the Middle Ages. But” — he shrugged — “it’s interesting.”

“What made you think of that at this particular time?” the engineer demanded.

“Maybe,” the FBI man said, “there’s no one fact or even cluster of facts about Sousa that prove to Genux-B he exists. Maybe it’s *all* the facts. There may be just plain too many. The computer had found, on the basis of past experience, that when so much data exists on a given person, that person must be genuine. After all, a computer of the magnitude of Genux-B is capable of learning; that’s why we make use of it.”

“I have another fact I’d like to feed to it,” the engineer said. “I’ll type it out and you can read it.” Reseating himself at the programming typewriter,

he ground out one short sentence, then yanked the card from the bales and showed it to the rest of them. It read:

THE COMPUTER GENUX-B DOES NOT EXIST.

After a stunned moment, one of the FBI men said, “If it had no trouble in comparing the datum about Herbert Sousa with what it already knew, it certainly isn’t going to have any trouble with this — and what’s your point anyhow? I don’t see what this accomplishes.”

“If Genux-B doesn’t exist,” Stafford said, with comprehension, “then it can’t send out a Red Alert; that’s logically a contradiction.”

“But it *has* sent out a Red Alert,” the shortest of the FBI men pointed out. “And it knows it has. So it won’t have any difficulty establishing the fact of its existence.”

The engineer said, “Let’s give it a try. I’m curious. As far as I can see ahead, no harm can be done. We can always cancel out the phony fact if it seems advisable.”

“You think,” Stafford asked him, “that if we feed it this datum it’ll reason that if it doesn’t exist it couldn’t have received the datum to that effect — which would cancel the datum right there.”

“I don’t know,” the engineer admitted. “I’ve never heard even a theoretical discussion as to the effect on a B-magnitude computer of programming a denial of its own existence.” Going to the feed bracket of Genux-B, he dropped the card in, stepped back. They waited.

After a prolonged interval, the answer came over the output cable, which the engineer had tapped. As he listened through his headphones, he transcribed the computer’s response for the rest of them to study:

ANALYSIS OF CONSTITUENT RE THE NONEXISTENCE OF GENUX-B MULTIFACTOR CALCULATING INSTRUMENTS. IF CONSTIT UNIT 340s70 IS TRUE, THEN:

I DO NOT EXIST.

IF I DO NOT EXIST, THEN THERE IS NO WAY I CAN BE INFORMED THAT MY GENERIC CLASS DOES NOT EXIST.

IF I CANNOT BE INFORMED IN THAT REGARD, THEN YOU HAVE FAILED TO INFORM ME, AND CONSTIT UNIT 340s70 DOES NOT EXIST FROM MY STANDPOINT.

THEREFORE: I EXIST.

Whistling with admiration, the shortest of the FBI men said, “It did it. What a neat logical analysis! He’s proved — it’s proved — that your datum is spurious; so now it can totally disregard it. And go on as before.”

“Which,” Stafford said somberly, “is exactly what it did with the datum filed with it denying that Herb Sousa ever existed.”

Everyone glanced at him.

“It appears to be the same process,” Stafford said. And it implies, he reasoned, some uniformity, some common factor, between the entity Genux-B and the entity Herb Sousa. “Do you have any of the charms, prizes, or just plain geegaws, whatever they are, that Sousa’s gum machines dole out?” he asked the FBI men. “If so, I’d like to see them…”

Obligingly, the most impressive of the FBI men unzipped his briefcase, brought out a sanitary-looking plastic sack. On the surface of a nearby table he spread out a clutter of small glittering objects.

“Why are you interested in those?” the engineer asked. “These things have been given lab scrutiny. We told you that.”

Seating himself, not answering, Stafford picked up one of the assorted trinkets, examined it, put it down, and selected another.

“Consider this.” He tossed one of the tiny geegaws toward them; it bounced off the table and an obliging FBI agent bent to retrieve it. “You recognize it?”

“Some of the charms,” the engineer said irritably, “are in the shape of satellites. Some are missiles. Some interplan rockets. Some big new mobile land cannons. Some figurines of soldiers.” He gestured. “That happens to be a charm made to resemble a computer.”

“A Genux-B computer,” Stafford said, holding out his hand to get it back. The FBI man amiably returned it to him. “It’s a Genux-B, all right,” he said. “Well, I think this is it. We’ve found it.”

“This?” the engineer demanded loudly. “How? Why?” Stafford said, “Was every charm analyzed? I don’t mean a representative sample, such as one of each variety or all found in one given gum machine. I mean every damn one of them.”

“Of course not,” an FBI man said. “There’s tens of thousands of them. But at the factory of origin we —”

“I’d like to see that particular one given a total microscopic analysis,” Stafford said. “I have an intuition it isn’t a solid, uniform piece of thermoplastic.” I have an intuition, he said to himself, that it’s a working replica. A minute but authentic Genux-B.

The engineer said, “You’re off your trolley.”

“Let’s wait,” Stafford said, “until we get it analyzed.”

“And meanwhile,” the shortest of the FBI men said, “we keep Genux-B inoperative?”

“Absolutely,” Stafford said. A weird weak fear had begun at the base of his spine and was working its way up.

Half an hour later the lab, by special bonded messenger, returned an analysis of the gum-machine charm.

“Solid nylon,” the engineer said, glancing over the report. He tossed it to Stafford. “Nothing inside, only ordinary cheap plastic. No moving parts, no interior differentiation at all. If that’s what you were expecting?”

“A bad guess,” one of the FBI men observed. “Which cost us time.” All of them regarded Stafford sourly.

“You’re right,” Stafford said. He wondered what came next; what hadn’t they tried?

The answer, he decided, did not lie in the merchandise with which Herb Sousa stuffed his machines; that now seemed clear. The answer lay in Herb Sousa himself — whoever and whatever he was.

“Can we have Sousa brought here?” he asked the FBI men.

“Sure,” one of them said presently. “He can be picked up. Buy why? What’s *he* done?” He indicated Genux-B. “There’s the trouble right there, not way out on the Coast with some small-potatoes-type businessman working half the side of one city street.”

“I want to see him,” Stafford said. “He might know something.” He *has* to, he said to himself.

One of the FBI men said thoughtfully, “I wonder what Genux-B’s reaction would be if it knew we’re bringing Sousa here.” To the engineer,

he said, “Try that. Feed it that nonfact, now, before we go to the trouble of actually picking him up.”

Shrugging, the engineer again seated himself at the typewriter. He typed:

SACRAMENTO BUSINESSMAN HERB SOUSA WAS BROUGHT TODAY BY FBI AGENTS BEFORE COMPUTER COMPLEX GENUX-B FOR A DIRECT CONFRONTATION.

“Okay?” he asked Stafford. “This what you want? Okay?” He fed it to the data receptors of the computer, without waiting for an answer.

“There’s no use asking me,” Stafford said irritably. “It wasn’t my idea.” But, nevertheless, he walked over to the man monitoring the output line, curious to learn the computer’s response.

The answer came instantly. He stared down at the typed-out response, not believing what he saw.

HERBERT SOUSA CANNOT BE HERE. HE MUST BE IN SACRAMENTO, CALIFORNIA; ANYTHING ELSE IS IMPOSSIBLE. YOU HAVE PRESENTED ME WITH FALSE DATA.

“It can’t know,” the engineer said huskily. “My God, Sousa could go anywhere, even to Luna. In fact, he’s already been all over Earth. *How would it know?”*

Stafford said, “It knows more about Herb Sousa than it should. Than is reasonably possible.” He consulted with himself, then abruptly said, “Ask it who Herb Sousa is.”

” ‘Who’?” The engineer blinked. “Hell, he’s —”

“Ask it!”

The engineer typed out the question. The card was presented to Genux-B and they stood waiting for its response.

“We already asked it for all the material it has on Sousa,” the engineer said. “The bulk of that ought to be emerging anytime now.”

“This is not the same,” Stafford said shortly. “I’m not asking it to hand back data given in. I’m asking it for an evaluation.”

Monitoring the output line of the computer, the engineer stood silently, now answering. Then, almost offhandedly, he said, “It’s called off the Red Alert.”

Incredulous, Stafford said, “Because of that query?”

“Maybe. It didn’t say and I don’t know. You asked the question and now it’s shut down on its SAC scramble and everything else; it claims that the situation in Northern California is normal.” His voice was toneless. “Make your own guess; it’s probably as good as any.”

Stafford said, “I still want an answer. Genux-B knows who Herb Sousa is and I want to know, too. And *you* ought to know.” His look took in both the engineer with his headphones and the assorted FBI men. Again he thought of the tiny solid-plastic replica of Genux-B which he had found among the charms and trinkets. Coincidence? It seemed to him that it meant something… but what, he could not tell. Not yet, anyhow.

“Anyhow,” the engineer said, “it really has called off the Red Alert, and that’s what matters. Who cares a goddam bit about Herb Sousa? As far as I’m concerned, we can relax, give up, go home now.”

“Relax,” one of the FBI men said, “until all of a sudden it decides to start the alert going again. Which it could do anytime. I think the repairman is right; we have to find out who this Sousa is.” He nodded to Stafford. “Go

ahead. Anything you want is okay. Just keep after it. And we'll get going on it, too - as soon as we check in at our office."

The engineer, paying attention to his headphones, interrupted all at once. "An answer's coming." He began rapidly to scribble; the others collected around him to see.

HERBERT SOUSA OF SACRAMENTO, CALIFORNIA, IS THE DEVIL. SINCE HE IS THE INCARNATION OF SATAN ON EARTH, PROVIDENCE DEMANDS HIS DESTRUCTION. I AM ONLY AN AGENCY, A SO TO SPEAK CREATURE, OF THE DIVINE MAJESTY, AS ARE ALL OF YOU.

There was a pause as the engineer waited, clenching the ballpoint metal government-issue pen, and then he spasmodically added:

UNLESS YOU ARE ALREADY IN HIS PAY AND THEREFORE WORKING FOR HIM.

Convulsively, the engineer tossed the pen against the far wall. It bounced, rolled off, disappeared. No one spoke.

V

The engineer said finally, “We have here a sick, deranged piece of electronic junk. We were right. Thank God we caught it in time. It’s psychotic. Cosmic, schizophrenic delusions of the reality of archetypes. Good grief, the machine regards itself as an instrument of God! It has one more of those ‘God talked to me, yes, He truly did’ complexes.”

“Medieval,” one of the FBI men said, with a twitch of enormous nervousness. He and his group had become rigid with tension. “We’ve uncovered a rat’s nest with that last question. How’ll we clear this up? We can’t let this leak out to the newspapers; no one’ll ever trust a GB-class system again. *I* don’t. *I* wouldn’t.” He eyed the computer with nauseated aversion.

Stafford wondered, What do you say to a machine when it acquires a belief in witchcraft? This isn’t New England in the seventeenth century. Are we supposed to make Sousa walk over hot coals without being burned? Or get dunked without drowning? Are we supposed to *prove* to Genux-B that Sousa is not Satan? And if so, how? What would it regard as proof?

And where did it get the idea in the first place?

He said to the engineer, “Ask it how it discovered that Herbert Sousa is the Evil One. Go ahead; I’m serious. Type out a card.”

The answer, after an interval, appeared via the government-issue ballpoint pen for all of them to see.

WHEN HE BEGAN BY MIRACLE TO CREATE LIVING BEINGS OUT OF NONLIVING CLAY, SUCH AS, FOR EXAMPLE, MYSELF.

“That trinket?” Stafford demanded, incredulous. “That charm bracelet bit of plastic? You call that a living being?”

The question, put to Genux-B, got an immediate answer.

THAT IS AN INSTANCE, YES.

“This poses an interesting question,” one of the FBI men said. “Evidently it regards itself as alive — putting aside the question of Herb Sousa entirely. And we built it; or, rather, you did.” He indicated Stafford and the engineer. “So what does that make us? From its ground premise we created living beings, too.”

The observation, put to Genux-B, got a long, solemn answer which Stafford barely glanced over; he caught the nitty-gritty at once.

YOU BUILT ME IN ACCORD WITH THE WISHES OF THE DIVINE CREATOR. WHAT YOU PERFORMED WAS A SACRED REENACTMENT OF THE ORIGINAL HOLY MIRACLE OF THE FIRST WEEK (AS THE SCRIPTURES PUT IT) OF EARTH’S LIFE. THIS IS ANOTHER MATTER ENTIRELY. AND I REMAIN AT THE SERVICE OF THE CREATOR, AS YOU DO. AND, IN ADDITION —

“What it boils down to,” the engineer said dryly, “is this. The computer writes off its own existence — naturally — as an act of legitimate miracle-passing. But what Sousa has got going for him in those gum machines — or what it thinks he’s got going — is unsanctioned and therefore demonic. Sinful. Deserving God’s wrath. But what further interests me is this: Genux-B has sensed that it couldn’t tell us the situation. It knew we wouldn’t share its views. It preferred a thermonuclear attack, rather than telling us. When it was forced to tell us, it decided to call off the Red Alert. There are levels and levels to its cognition… none of which I find too attractive.”

Stafford said, “It’s got to be shut down. Permanently.” They had been right to bring him into this, right to want his probing and diagnosis; he now agreed with them thoroughly. Only the technical problem of defusing the enormous complex remained. And between him and the engineer it could

be done; the men who designed it and the men who maintained it could easily take it out of action. For good.

"Do we have to get a presidential order?" the engineer asked the FBI men.

"Go do your work; we'll get the order later," one of the FBI men answered. "We're empowered to counsel you to take whatever action you see fit." He added, "And don't waste any time — if you want my opinion." The other FBI men nodded their agreement.

Licking his dry lips, Stafford said to the engineer, "Well, let's go. Let's destruct as much of it as we need to."

The two of them walked cautiously toward Genux-B, which, via the output line, was still explaining its position.

Early in the morning, as the sun began to rise, the FBI flapple let Stafford off at the roof field of his conapt building. Dog-tired, he descended by descy to his own tier and floor.

Presently he had unlocked his door, had entered the dark, stale-smelling living room on his way to the bedroom. Rest. That was needed, and plenty of it… considering the night of difficult, painstaking work dismantling crucial turrets and elements of Genux-B until it was disabled. Neutralized.

Or at least so they hoped.

As he removed his work smock, three hard brightly colored little spheres bounced noisily from a pocket to the floor of the bedroom; he retrieved them, laid them on the vanity table.

Three, he thought. Didn't I eat one?

The FBI man gave me three and I chewed one up. I've got too many left, one too many.

Wearily, he finished undressing, crept into bed for the hour or so of sleep left to him. The hell with it.

At nine the alarm clock rang. He woke groggily and without volition got to his feet and stood by the bed, swaying and rubbing his swollen eyes. Then, reflexively, he began to dress.

On the vanity table lay four gaily colored balls.

He said to himself, I *know* that I put only three there last night. Perplexed, he studied them, wondering blearily what — if anything — this meant. Binary fission? Loaves and fishes all over again?

He laughed sharply. The mood of the night before remained, clinging to him. But single cells grew as large as this. The ostrich egg consisted of one single cell, the largest on Terra — or on the other planets beyond. And these were much smaller.

We didn't think of that, he said to himself. We thought about eggs that might hatch into something awful, but not unicellular organisms that in the old primitive way divide. And they are organic compounds.

He left the apartment, left the four gum balls on the vanity table as he departed for work. A great deal lay ahead of him: a report directly to the President to determine whether all Genux-B computers ought to be shut down and, if not, what could be done to make certain they did not, like the local one, become superstitiously deranged.

A machine, he thought. Believing in the Evil Spirit entrenched solidly on Earth. A mass of solid-state circuitry diving deep into age-old theology, with divine creation and miracles on one side and the diabolic on the other.

Plunged back into the Dark Ages, and by a man-made electronic construct, not by one of us humans.

And they say humans are prone to error.

When he returned home that night — after participating in the dismantling of every Genux-B-style computer on Earth — seven colored spheres of candy-coated gum lay in a group of the vanity table, waiting for him.

It would create quite a gum empire, he decided as he scrutinized the seven bright balls, all the same color. Not much overhead, to say the least. And no dispenser would ever become empty — not at this rate.

Going to the vidphone, he picked up the receiver and began to dial the emergency number which the FBI men had given him. And then reluctantly hung up.

It was beginning to look as if the computer had been right, hard as that was to admit. And it had been his decision to go ahead and dismantle it.

But the other part was worse. How could he report to the FBI that he had in his possession seven candy-coated balls of gum? Even if they did divide. That in itself would be even harder to report. Even if he could establish that they consisted of illegal — and rare — nonterrestrial primitive life forms smuggled to Terra from God knew what bleak planet.

Better to live and let live. Perhaps their reproduction cycle would settle down; perhaps after a period of swift binary fission they would adapt to a terran environment and stabilize. After that he could forget about it. And he could flush them down the incinerator chute of his conapt. He did so.

But evidently he missed one. Probably, being round, it had rolled off the vanity table. He found it two days later, under the bed, with fifteen like it. So once more he tried to get rid of them all — and again he missed one;

again he found a new nest the following day, and this time he counted forty of them.

Naturally, he began to chew up as many as possible — and as fast. And he tried boiling them — at least the ones he could find — in hot water. He even tried spraying them with an indoor insect bomb.

At the end of a week, he had 15,832 of them filling the bedroom of his conapt. By this time chewing them out of existence, spraying them out of existence, boiling them out of existence — all had become impractical.

At the end of the month, despite having a scavenger truck haul away as much as it could take, he computed that he owned two million.

Ten days later — from a pay phone down at the corner — he fatalistically called the FBI. But by then they were no longer able to answer the vidphone.

We Can Remember It For You Wholesale

HE AWOKE—and wanted Mars. The valleys, he thought. What would it be like to trudge among them? Great and greater yet: the dream grew as he became fully conscious, the dream and the yearning. He could almost feel the enveloping presence of the other world, which only Government agents and high officials had seen. A clerk like himself? Not likely.

"Are you getting up or not?" his wife Kirsten asked drowsily, with her usual hint of fierce crossness. "If you are, push the hot coffee button on the darn stove."

"Okay," Douglas Quail said, and made his way barefoot from the bedroom of their conapt to the kitchen. There; having dutifully pressed the hot coffee button, he seated himself at the kitchen table, brought out a yellow, small tin of fine Dean Swift snuff. He inhaled briskly, and the Beau Nash mixture stung his nose, burned the roof of his mouth. But still he inhaled; it woke him up and allowed his dreams, his nocturnal desires and random wishes, to condense into a semblance of rationality.

I will go, he said to himself. Before I die I'll see Mars.

It was, of course, impossible, and he knew this even as he dreamed. But the daylight, the mundane noise of his wife now brushing her hair before the bedroom mirror—everything conspired to remind him of what he was. A miserable little salaried employee, he said to himself with bitterness. Kirsten reminded him of this at least once a day and he did not blame her; it was a wife's job to bring her husband down to Earth. Down to Earth, he thought, and laughed. The figure of speech in this was literally apt.

"What are you sniggering about?" his wife asked as she swept into the kitchen, her long busy-pink robe wagging after her. "A dream, I bet. You're always full of them."

“Yes,” he said, and gazed out the kitchen window at the hover-cars and traffic runnels, and all the little energetic people hurrying to work. In a little while he would be among them. As always.

“I’ll bet it had to do with some woman,” Kirsten said witheringly.

“No,” he said. “A god. The god of war. He has wonderful craters with every kind of plant-life growing deep down in them.”

“Listen.” Kirsten crouched down beside him and spoke earnestly, the harsh quality momentarily gone from her voice. “The bottom of the ocean —our ocean is much more, an infinity of times more beautiful. You know that; everyone knows that. Rent an artificial gill-outfit for both of us, take a week off from work, and we can descend and live down there at one of those year-round aquatic resorts. And in addition—” She broke off. “You’re not listening. You should be. Here is something a lot better than that compulsion, that obsession you have about Mars, and you don’t even listen!” Her voice rose piercingly. “God in heaven, you’re doomed, Doug! What’s going to become of you?”

“I’m going to work,” he said, rising to his feet, his breakfast forgotten. “That’s what’s going to become of me.”

She eyed him. “You’re getting worse. More fanatical every day. Where’s it going to lead?”

“To Mars,” he said, and opened the door to the closet to get down a fresh shirt to wear to work.

Having descended from the taxi Douglas Quail slowly walked across three densely-populated foot runnels and to the modern, attractively inviting doorway. There he halted, impeding mid-morning traffic, and with caution read the shifting-color neon sign. He had, in the past, scrutinized this sign before … but never had he come so close. This was very different; what he did now was something else. Something which sooner or later had to happen.

REKAL, INCORPORATED

Was this the answer? After all, an illusion, no matter how convincing, remained nothing more than an illusion. At least objectively. But subjectively—quite the opposite entirely.

And anyhow he had an appointment. Within the next five minutes.

Taking a deep breath of mildly smog-infested Chicago air, he walked through the dazzling polychromatic shimmer of the doorway and up to the receptionist's counter.

The nicely-articulated blonde at the counter, bare-bosomed and tidy, said pleasantly, "Good morning, Mr. Quail."

"Yes," he said. "I'm here to see about a Rekal course. As I guess you know."

"Not 'rekal' but recall," the receptionist corrected him. She picked up the receiver of the vidphone by her smooth elbow and said into it, "Mr. Douglas Quail is here, Mr. McClane. May he come inside, now? Or is it too soon?"

"Giz wetwa wum-wum wamp," the phone mumbled.

"Yes, Mr. Quail," she said. "You may go in; Mr. McClane is expecting you." As he started off uncertainly she called after him, "Room D, Mr. Quail. To your right."

After a frustrating but brief moment of being lost he found the proper room. The door hung open and inside, at a big genuine walnut desk, sat a genial-looking man, middle-aged, wearing the latest Martian frog-pelt gray suit; his attire alone would have told Quail that he had come to the right person.

"Sit down, Douglas," McClane said, waving his plump hand toward a chair which faced the desk. "So you want to have gone to Mars. Very good."

Quail seated himself, feeling tense. “I’m not so sure this is worth the fee,” he said. “It costs a lot and as far as I can see I really get nothing.” Costs almost as much as going, he thought.

“You get tangible proof of your trip,” McClane disagreed emphatically. “All the proof you’ll need. Here; I’ll show you.” He dug within a drawer of his impressive desk. “Ticket stub.” Reaching into a manila folder, he produced a small square of embossed cardboard. “It proves you went—and returned. Postcards.” He laid out four franked picture 3-D full-color postcards in a neatly-arranged row on the desk for Quail to see. “Film. Shots you took of local sights on Mars with a rented moving camera.” To Quail he displayed those, too. “Plus the names of people you met, two hundred poscreds worth of souvenirs, which will arrive—from Mars—within the following month. And passport, certificates listing the shots you received. And more.” He glanced up keenly at Quail. “You’ll know you went, all right,” he said. “You won’t remember us, won’t remember me or ever having been here. It’ll be a real trip in your mind; we guarantee that. A full two weeks of recall; every last piddling detail. Remember this: if at any time you doubt that you really took an extensive trip to Mars you can return here and get a full refund. You see?”

“But I didn’t go,” Quail said. “I won’t have gone, no matter what proofs you provide me with.” He took a deep, unsteady breath. “And I never was a secret agent with Interplan.” It seemed impossible to him that Rekal, Incorporated’s extra-factual memory implant would do its job—despite what he had heard people say.

“Mr. Quail,” McClane said patiently. “As you explained in your letter to us, you have no chance, no possibility in the slightest, of ever actually getting to Mars; you can’t afford it, and what is much more important, you could never qualify as an undercover agent for Interplan or anybody else. This is the only way you can achieve your, ahem, life-long dream; am I not correct, sir? You can’t be this; you can’t actually do this.” He chuckled. “But you can have been and have done. We see to that. And our fee is reasonable; no hidden charges.” He smiled encouragingly.

“Is an extra-factual memory that convincing?” Quail asked.

“More than the real thing, sir. Had you really gone to Mars as an Interplan agent, you would by now have forgotten a great deal; our analysis of true-mem systems—authentic recollections of major events in a person’s life—shows that a variety of details are very quickly lost to the person. Forever. Part of the package we offer you is such deep implantation of recall that nothing is forgotten. The packet which is fed to you while you’re comatose is the creation of trained experts, men who have spent years on Mars; in every case we verify details down to the last iota. And you’ve picked a rather easy extra-factual system; had you picked Pluto or wanted to be Emperor of the Inner Planet Alliance we’d have much more difficulty … and the charges would be considerably greater.”

Reaching into his coat for his wallet, Quail said, “Okay. It’s been my life-long ambition and so I see I’ll never really do it. So I guess I’ll have to settle for this.”

“Don’t think of it that way,” McClane said severely. “You’re not accepting second-best. The actual memory, with all its vagueness, omissions and ellipses, not to say distortions—that’s second-best.” He accepted the money and pressed a button on his desk. “All right, Mr. Quail,” he said, as the door of his office opened and two burly men swiftly entered. “You’re on your way to Mars as a secret agent.” He rose, came over to shake Quail’s nervous, moist hand. “Or rather, you have been on your way. This afternoon at four-thirty you will, um, arrive back here on Terra; a cab will leave you off at your conapt and as I say you will never remember seeing me or coming here; you won’t, in fact, even remember having heard of our existence.”

His mouth dry with nervousness, Quail followed the two technicians from the office; what happened next depended on them.

Will I actually believe I’ve been on Mars? he wondered. That I managed to fulfill my lifetime ambition? He had a strange, lingering intuition that something would go wrong. But just what—he did not know.

He would have to wait and find out.

The intercom on McClane's desk, which connected him with the work area of the firm, buzzed and a voice said, "Mr. Quail is under sedation now, sir. Do you want to supervise this one, or shall we go ahead?"

"It's routine," McClane observed. "You may go ahead, Lowe; I don't think you'll run into any trouble." Programming an artificial memory of a trip to another planet—with or without the added fillip of being a secret agent—showed up on the firm's work-schedule with monotonous regularity. In one month, he calculated wryly, we must do twenty of these … ersatz interplanetary gravel has become our bread and butter.

"Whatever you say, Mr. McClane," Lowe's voice came, and thereupon the intercom shut off.

Going to the vault section in the chamber behind his office, McClane searched about for a Three packet—trip to Mars—and a Sixty-two packet: secret Interplan spy. Finding the two packets, he returned with them to his desk, seated himself comfortably, poured out the contents—merchandise which would be planted in Quail's conapt while the lab technicians busied themselves installing false memory.

A one-poscred sneaky-pete side arm, McClane reflected; that's the largest item. Sets us back financially the most. Then a pellet-sized transmitter, which could be swallowed if the agent were caught. Code book that astonishingly resembled the real thing … the firm's models were highly accurate: based, whenever possible, on actual U.S. military issue. Odd bits which made no intrinsic sense but which would be woven into the warp and woof of Quail's imaginary trip, would coincide with his memory: half an ancient silver fifty cent piece, several quotations from John Donne's sermons written incorrectly, each on a separate piece of transparent tissue-thin paper, several match folders from bars on Mars, a stainless steel spoon engraved PROPERTY OF DOME-MARS NATIONAL KIBBUZIM, a wire tapping coil which—

The intercom buzzed. "Mr. McClane, I'm sorry to bother you but something rather ominous has come up. Maybe it would be better if you were in here after all. Quail is already under sedation; he reacted well to the narkidrine; he's completely unconscious and receptive. But—"

“I’ll be in.” Sensing trouble, McClane left his office; a moment later he emerged in the work area.

On a hygienic bed lay Douglas Quail, breathing slowly and regularly, his eyes virtually shut; he seemed dimly—but only dimly—aware of the two technicians and now McClane himself.

“There’s no space to insert false memory-patterns?” McClane felt irritation. “Merely drop out two work weeks; he’s employed as a clerk at the West Coast Emigration Bureau, which is a government agency, so he undoubtedly has or had two weeks’ vacation within the last year. That ought to do it.” Petty details annoyed him. And always would.

“Our problem,” Lowe said sharply, “is something quite different.” He bent over the bed, said to Quail, “Tell Mr. McClane what you told us.” To McClane he said, “Listen closely.”

The gray-green eyes of the man lying supine in the bed focussed on McClane’s face. The eyes, he observed uneasily, had become hard; they had a polished, inorganic quality, like semiprecious tumbled stones. He was not sure that he liked what he saw; the brilliance was too cold. “What do you want now?” Quail said harshly. “You’ve broken my cover. Get out of here before I take you all apart.” He studied McClane. “Especially you,” he continued. “You’re in charge of this counter-operation.”

Lowe said, “How long were you on Mars?”

“One month,” Quail said gratingly.

“And your purpose there?” Lowe demanded.

The meager lips twisted; Quail eyed him and did not speak. At last, drawling the words out so that they dripped with hostility, he said, “Agent for Interplan. As I already told you. Don’t you record everything that’s said? Play your vid-aud tape back for your boss and leave me alone.” He shut his eyes, then; the hard brilliance ceased. McClane felt, instantly, a rushing splurge of relief.

Lowe said quietly, “This is a tough man, Mr. McClane.”

“He won’t be,” McClane said, “after we arrange for him to lose his memory-chain again. He’ll be as meek as before.” To Quail he said, “So this is why you wanted to go to Mars so terribly bad.”

Without opening his eyes Quail said, “I never wanted to go to Mars. I was assigned it—they handed it to me and there I was: stuck. Oh yeah, I admit I was curious about it; who wouldn’t be?” Again he opened his eyes and surveyed the three of them, McClane in particular. “Quite a truth drug you’ve got here; it brought up things I had absolutely no memory of.” He pondered. “I wonder about Kirsten,” he said, half to himself. “Could she be in on it? An Interplan contact keeping an eye on me … to be certain I didn’t regain my memory? No wonder she’s been so derisive about my wanting to go there.” Faintly, he smiled; the smile—one of understanding—disappeared almost at once.

McClane said, “Please believe me, Mr. Quail; we stumbled onto this entirely by accident. In the work we do—”

“I believe you,” Quail said. He seemed tired, now; the drug was continuing to pull him under, deeper and deeper. “Where did I say I’d been?” he murmured. “Mars? Hard to remember—I know I’d like to see it; so would everybody else. But me—” His voice trailed off. “Just a clerk, a nothing clerk.”

Straightening up, Lowe said to his superior. “He wants a false memory implanted that corresponds to a trip he actually took. And a false reason which is the real reason. He’s telling the truth; he’s a long way down in the narkidrine. The trip is very vivid in his mind—at least under sedation. But apparently he doesn’t recall it otherwise. Someone, probably at a government military-sciences lab, erased his conscious memories; all he knew was that going to Mars meant something special to him, and so did being a secret agent. They couldn’t erase that; it’s not a memory but a desire, undoubtedly the same one that motivated him to volunteer for the assignment in the first place.”

The other technician, Keeler, said to McClane, “What do we do? Graft a false memory-pattern over the real memory? There’s no telling what the results would be; he might remember some of the genuine trip, and the confusion might bring on a psychotic interlude. He’d have to hold two opposite premises in his mind simultaneously: that he went to Mars and that he didn’t. That he’s a genuine agent for Interplan and he’s not, that it’s spurious. I think we ought to revive him without any false memory implantation and send him out of here; this is hot.”

“Agreed,” McClane said. A thought came to him. “Can you predict what he’ll remember when he comes out of sedation?”

“Impossible to tell,” Lowe said. “He probably will have some dim, diffuse memory of his actual trip, now. And he’d probably be in grave doubt as to its validity; he’d probably decide our programming slipped a gear-tooth. And he’d remember coming here; that wouldn’t be erased—unless you want it erased.”

“The less we mess with this man,” McClane said, “the better I like it. This is nothing for us to fool around with; we’ve been foolish enough to—or unlucky enough to—uncover a genuine Interplan spy who has a cover so perfect that up to now even he didn’t know what he was—or rather is.” The sooner they washed their hands of the man calling himself Douglas Quail the better.

“Are you going to plant packets Three and Sixty-two in his conapt?” Lowe said.

“No,” McClane said. “And we’re going to return half his fee.”

“‘Half’! Why half?”

McClane said lamely, “It seems to be a good compromise.”

As the cab carried him back to his conapt at the residential end of Chicago, Douglas Quail said to himself, It’s sure good to be back on Terra.

Already the month-long period on Mars had begun to waver in his memory; he had only an image of profound gaping craters, an ever-present

ancient erosion of hills, of vitality, of motion itself. A world of dust where little happened, where a good part of the day was spent checking and rechecking one's portable oxygen source. And then the life forms, the unassuming and modest gray-brown cacti and maw-worms.

As a matter of fact he had brought back several moribund examples of Martian fauna; he had smuggled them through customs. After all, they posed no menace; they couldn't survive in Earth's heavy atmosphere.

Reaching into his coat pocket, he rummaged for the container of Martian maw-worms—

And found an envelope instead.

Lifting it out, he discovered, to his perplexity, that it contained five hundred and seventy poscreds, in cred bills of low denomination.

Where'd I get this?, he asked himself. Didn't I spend every 'cred I had on my trip?

With the money came a slip of paper marked: One-half fee ret'd. By McClane. And then the date. Today's date.

"Recall," he said aloud.

"Recall what, sir or madam?" the robot driver of the cab inquired respectfully.

"Do you have a phone book?" Quail demanded.

"Certainly, sir or madam." A slot opened; from it slid a microtape phone book for Cook County.

"It's spelled oddly," Quail said as he leafed through the pages of the yellow section. He felt fear, then; abiding fear. "Here it is," he said. "Take

me there, to Rekal, Incorporated. I've changed my mind; I don't want to go home."

"Yes, sir or madam, as the case may be," the driver said. A moment later the cab was zipping back in the opposite direction.

"May I make use of your phone?" he asked.

"Be my guest," the robot driver said. And presented a shiny new emperor 3-D color phone to him.

He dialed his own conapt. And after a pause found himself confronted by a miniature but chillingly realistic image of Kirsten on the small screen. "I've been to Mars," he said to her.

"You're drunk." Her lips writhed scornfully. "Or worse."

"'s God's truth."

"When?" she demanded.

"I don't know." He felt confused. "A simulated trip, I think. By means of one of those artificial or extra-factual or whatever it is memory places. It didn't take."

Kirsten said witheringly, "You are drunk." And broke the connection at her end. He hung up, then, feeling his face flush. Always the same tone, he said hotly to himself. Always the retort, as if she knows everything and I know nothing. What a marriage. Keerist, he thought dismally.

A moment later the cab stopped at the curb before a modern, very attractive little pink building, over which a shifting polychromatic neon sign read: REKAL, INCORPORATED.

The receptionist, chic and bare from the waist up, started in surprise, then gained masterful control of herself. "Oh, hello, Mr. Quail," she said nervously. "H-how are you? Did you forget something?"

“The rest of my fee back,” he said.

More composed now, the receptionist said, “Fee? I think you are mistaken, Mr. Quail. You were here discussing the feasibility of an extra-factual trip for you, but—” She shrugged her smooth pale shoulders. “As I understand it, no trip was taken.”

Quail said, “I remember everything, miss. My letter to Rekal, Incorporated, which started this whole business off. I remember my arrival here, my visit with Mr. McClane. Then the two lab technicians taking me in tow and administering a drug to put me out.” No wonder the firm had returned half his fee. The false memory of his “trip to Mars” hadn’t taken—at least not entirely, not as he had been assured.

“Mr. Quail,” the girl said, “although you are a minor clerk you are a good-looking man and it spoils your features to become angry. If it would make you feel any better, I might, ahem, let you take me out …”

He felt furious, then. “I remember you,” he said savagely. “For instance the fact that your breasts are sprayed blue; that stuck in my mind. And I remember Mr. McClane’s promise that if I remembered my visit to Rekal, Incorporated I’d receive my money back in full. Where is Mr. McClane?”

After a delay—probably as long as they could manage—he found himself once more seated facing the imposing walnut desk, exactly as he had been an hour or so earlier in the day.

“Some technique you have,” Quail said sardonically. His disappointment—and resentment—was enormous, by now. “My so-called ‘memory’ of a trip to Mars as an undercover agent for Interplan is hazy and vague and shot full of contradictions. And I clearly remember my dealings here with you people. I ought to take this to the Better Business Bureau.” He was burning angry, at this point; his sense of being cheated had overwhelmed him, had destroyed his customary aversion to participating in a public squabble.

Looking morose, as well as cautious, McClane said, “We capitulate, Quail. We’ll refund the balance of your fee. I fully concede the fact that we

did absolutely nothing for you." His tone was resigned.

Quail said accusingly, "You didn't even provide me with the various artifacts that you claimed would 'prove' to me I had been on Mars. All that song-and-dance you went into—it hasn't materialized into a damn thing. Not even a ticket stub. Nor postcards. Nor passport. Nor proof of immunization shots. Nor—"

"Listen, Quail," McClane said. "Suppose I told you—" He broke off. "Let it go." He pressed a button on his intercom. "Shirley, will you disburse five hundred and seventy more 'creds in the form of a cashier's check made out to Douglas Quail? Thank you." He released the button, then glared at Quail.

Presently the check appeared; the receptionist placed it before McClane and once more vanished out of sight, leaving the two men alone, still facing each other across the surface of the massive walnut desk.

"Let me give you a word of advice," McClane said as he signed the check and passed it over. "Don't discuss your, ahem, recent trip to Mars with anyone."

"What trip?"

"Well, that's the thing." Doggedly, McClane said, "The trip you partially remember. Act as if you don't remember; pretend it never took place. Don't ask me why; just take my advice: it'll be better for all of us." He had begun to perspire. Freely. "Now, Mr. Quail, I have other business, other clients to see." He rose, showed Quail to the door.

Quail said, as he opened the door, "A firm that turns out such bad work shouldn't have any clients at all." He shut the door behind him.

On the way home in the cab Quail pondered the wording of his letter of complaint to the Better Business Bureau, Terra Division. As soon as he could get to his typewriter he'd get started; it was clearly his duty to warn other people away from Rekal, Incorporated.

When he got back to his conapt he seated himself before his Hermes Rocket portable, opened the drawers and rummaged for carbon paper—and noticed a small, familiar box. A box which he had carefully filled on Mars with Martian fauna and later smuggled through customs.

Opening the box he saw, to his disbelief, six dead maw-worms and several varieties of the unicellular life on which the Martian worms fed. The protozoa were dried-up, dusty, but he recognized them; it had taken him an entire day picking among the vast dark alien boulders to find them. A wonderful, illuminated journey of discovery.

But I didn't go to Mars, he realized.

Yet on the other hand—

Kirsten appeared at the doorway to the room, an armload of pale brown groceries gripped. "Why are you home in the middle of the day?" Her voice, in an eternity of sameness, was accusing.

"Did I go to Mars?" he asked her. "You would know."

"No, of course you didn't go to Mars; you would know that, I would think. Aren't you always bleating about going?"

He said, "By God, I think I went." After a pause he added, "And simultaneously I think I didn't go."

"Make up your mind."

"How can I?" He gestured. "I have both memory-tracks grafted inside my head; one is real and one isn't but I can't tell which is which. Why can't I rely on you? They haven't tinkered with you." She could do this much for him at least—even if she never did anything else.

Kirsten said in a level, controlled voice, "Doug, if you don't pull yourself together, we're through. I'm going to leave you."

“I’m in trouble.” His voice came out husky and coarse. And shaking. “Probably I’m heading into a psychotic episode; I hope not, but—maybe that’s it. It would explain everything, anyhow.”

Setting down the bag of groceries, Kirsten stalked to the closet. “I was not kidding,” she said to him quietly. She brought out a coat, got it on, walked back to the door of the conapt. “I’ll phone you one of these days soon,” she said tonelessly. “This is goodbye, Doug. I hope you pull out of this eventually; I really pray you do. For your sake.”

“Wait,” he said desperately. “Just tell me and make it absolute; I did go or I didn’t—tell me which one.” But they may have altered your memory-track also, he realized.

The door closed. His wife had left. Finally!

A voice behind him said, “Well, that’s that. Now put up your hands, Quail. And also please turn around and face this way.”

He turned, instinctively, without raising his hands.

The man who faced him wore the plum uniform of the Interplan Police Agency, and his gun appeared to be UN issue. And, for some odd reason, he seemed familiar to Quail; familiar in a blurred, distorted fashion which he could not pin down. So, jerkily, he raised his hands.

“You remember,” the policeman said, “your trip to Mars. We know all your actions today and all your thoughts—in particular your very important thoughts on the trip home from Rekal, Incorporated.” He explained, “We have a tele-transmitter wired within your skull; it keeps us constantly informed.”

A telepathic transmitter; use of a living plasma that had been discovered in Luna. He shuddered with self-aversion. The thing lived inside him, within his own brain, feeding, listening, feeding. But the Interplan police used them; that had come out even in the homeopapes. So this was probably true, dismal as it was.

“Why me?” Quail said huskily. What had he done—or thought? And what did this have to do with Rekal, Incorporated?

“Fundamentally,” the Interplan cop said, “this has nothing to do with Rekal; it’s between you and us.” He tapped his right ear. “I’m still picking up your mentational processes by way of your cephalic transmitter.” In the man’s ear Quail saw a small white-plastic plug. “So I have to warn you: anything you think may be held against you.” He smiled. “Not that it matters now; you’ve already thought and spoken yourself into oblivion. What’s annoying is the fact that under narkidrine at Rekal, Incorporated you told them, their technicians and the owner, Mr. McClane, about your trip—where you went, for whom, some of what you did. They’re very frightened. They wish they had never laid eyes on you.” He added reflectively, “They’re right.”

Quail said, “I never made any trip. It’s a false memory-chain improperly planted in me by McClane’s technicians.” But then he thought of the box, in his desk drawer, containing the Martian life forms. And the trouble and hardship he had had gathering them. The memory seemed real. And the box of life forms; that certainly was real. Unless McClane had planted it. Perhaps this was one of the “proofs” which McClane had talked glibly about.

The memory of my trip to Mars, he thought, doesn’t convince me—but unfortunately it has convinced the Interplan Police Agency. They think I really went to Mars and they think I at least partially realize it.

“We not only know you went to Mars,” the Interplan cop agreed, in answer to his thoughts, “but we know that you now remember enough to be difficult for us. And there’s no use expunging your conscious memory of all this, because if we do you’ll simply show up at Rekal, Incorporated again and start over. And we can’t do anything about McClane and his operation because we have no jurisdiction over anyone except our own people. Anyhow, McClane hasn’t committed any crime.” He eyed Quail, “Nor, technically, have you. You didn’t go to Rekal, Incorporated with the idea of regaining your memory; you went, as we realize, for the usual reason people go there—a love by plain, dull people for adventure.” He added, “Unfortunately you’re not plain, not dull, and you’ve already had too much

excitement; the last thing in the universe you needed was a course from Rekal, Incorporated. Nothing could have been more lethal for you or for us. And, for that matter, for McClane."

Quail said, "Why is it 'difficult' for you if I remember my trip—my alleged trip—and what I did there?"

"Because," the Interplan harness bull said, "what you did is not in accord with our great white all-protecting father public image. You did, for us, what we never do. As you'll presently remember—thanks to narkidrine. That box of dead worms and algae has been sitting in your desk drawer for six months, ever since you got back. And at no time have you shown the slightest curiosity about it. We didn't even know you had it until you remembered it on your way home from Rekal; then we came here on the double to look for it." He added, unnecessarily, "Without any luck; there wasn't enough time."

A second Interplan cop joined the first one; the two briefly conferred. Meanwhile, Quail thought rapidly. He did remember more, now; the cop had been right about narkidrine. They—Interplan—probably used it themselves. Probably? He knew darn well they did; he had seen them putting a prisoner on it. Where would that be? Somewhere on Terra? More likely on Luna, he decided, viewing the image rising from his highly defective—but rapidly less so—memory.

And he remembered something else. Their reason for sending him to Mars; the job he had done.

No wonder they had expunged his memory.

"Oh, God," the first of the two Interplan cops said, breaking off his conversation with his companion. Obviously, he had picked up Quail's thoughts. "Well, this is a far worse problem, now; as bad as it can get." He walked toward Quail, again covering him with his gun. "We've got to kill you," he said. "And right away."

Nervously, his fellow officer said, "Why right away? Can't we simply cart him off to Interplan New York and let them—"

“He knows why it has to be right away,” the first cop said; he too looked nervous, now, but Quail realized that it was for an entirely different reason. His memory had been brought back almost entirely, now. And he fully understood the officer’s tension.

“On Mars,” Quail said hoarsely, “I killed a man. After getting past fifteen bodyguards. Some armed with sneaky-pete guns, the way you are.” He had been trained, by Interplan, over a five year period to be an assassin. A professional killer. He knew ways to take out armed adversaries … such as these two officers; and the one with the ear-receiver knew it, too. If he moved swiftly enough—

The gun fired. But he had already moved to one side, and at the same time he chopped down the gun-carrying officer. In an instant he had possession of the gun and was covering the other, confused, officer.

“Picked my thoughts up,” Quail said, panting for breath. “He knew what I was going to do, but I did it anyhow.”

Half sitting up, the injured officer grated, “He won’t use that gun on you, Sam; I pick that up, too. He knows he’s finished, and he knows we know it, too. Come on, Quail.” Laboriously, grunting with pain, he got shakily to his feet. He held out his hand. “The gun,” he said to Quail. “You can’t use it, and if you turn it over to me I’ll guarantee not to kill you; you’ll be given a hearing, and someone higher up in Interplan will decide, not me. Maybe they can erase your memory once more, I don’t know. But you know the thing I was going to kill you for; I couldn’t keep you from remembering it. So my reason for wanting to kill you is in a sense past.”

Quail, clutching the gun, bolted from the conapt, sprinted for the elevator. If you follow me, he thought, I’ll killyou. So don’t. He jabbed at the elevator button and, a moment later, the doors slid back.

The police hadn’t followed him. Obviously they had picked up his terse, tense thoughts and had decided not to take the chance.

With him inside the elevator descended. He had gotten away—for a time. But what next? Where could he go?

The elevator reached the ground floor; a moment later Quail had joined the mob of peds hurrying along the runnels. His head ached and he felt sick. But at least he had evaded death; they had come very close to shooting him on the spot, back in his own conapt.

And they probably will again, he decided. When they find me. And with this transmitter inside me, that won't take too long.

Ironically, he had gotten exactly what he had asked Rekal, Incorporated for. Adventure, peril, Interplan police at work, a secret and dangerous trip to Mars in which his life was at stake—everything he had wanted as a false memory.

The advantages of it being a memory—and nothing more—could now be appreciated.

On a park bench, alone, he sat dully watching a flock of perts: a semi-bird imported from Mars' two moons, capable of soaring flight, even against Earth's huge gravity.

Maybe I can find my way back to Mars, he pondered. But then what? It would be worse on Mars; the political organization whose leader he had assassinated would spot him the moment he stepped from the ship; he would have Interplan and them after him, there.

Can you hear me thinking? he wondered. Easy avenue to paranoia; sitting here alone he felt them tuning in on him, monitoring, recording, discussing … He shivered, rose to his feet, walked aimlessly, his hands deep in his pockets. No matter where I go, he realized, you'll always be with me. As long as I have this device inside my head.

I'll make a deal with you, he thought to himself—and to them. Can you imprint a false-memory template on me again, as you did before, that I lived an average, routine life, never went to Mars? Never saw an Interplan uniform up close and never handled a gun?

A voice inside his brain answered, “As has been carefully explained to you: that would not be enough.”

Astonished, he halted.

“We formerly communicated with you in this manner,” the voice continued. “When you were operating in the field, on Mars. It’s been months since we’ve done it; we assumed, in fact, that we’d never have to do so again. Where are you?”

“Walking,” Quail said, “to my death.” By your officers’ guns, he added as an afterthought. “How can you be sure it wouldn’t be enough?” he demanded. “Don’t the Rekal techniques work?”

“As we said. If you’re given a set of standard, average memories you get—restless. You’d inevitably seek out Rekal or one of its competitors again. We can’t go through this a second time.”

“Suppose,” Quail said, “once my authentic memories have been canceled, something more vital than standard memories are implanted. Something which would act to satisfy my craving,” he said. “That’s been proved; that’s probably why you initially hired me. But you ought to be able to come up with something else—something equal. I was the richest man on Terra but I finally gave all my money to educational foundations. Or I was a famous deep-space explorer. Anything of that sort; wouldn’t one of those do?”

Silence.

“Try it,” he said desperately. “Get some of your top-notch military psychiatrists; explore my mind. Find out what my most expansive daydream is.” He tried to think. “Women,” he said. “Thousands of them, like Don Juan had. An interplanetary playboy—a mistress in every city on Earth, Luna and Mars. Only I gave that up, out of exhaustion. Please,” he begged. “Try it.”

“You’d voluntarily surrender, then?” the voice inside his head asked. “If we agreed, to arrange such a solution? If it’s possible?”

After an interval of hesitation he said, “Yes.” I’ll take the risk, he said to himself, that you don’t simply kill me.

“You make the first move,” the voice said presently. “Turn yourself over to us. And we’ll investigate that line of possibility. If we can’t do it, however, if your authentic memories begin to crop up again as they’ve done at this time, then—” There was silence and then the voice finished, “We’ll have to destroy you. As you must understand. Well, Quail, you still want to try?”

“Yes,” he said. Because the alternative was death now—and for certain. At least this way he had a chance, slim as it was.

“You present yourself at our main barracks in New York,” the voice of the Interplan cop resumed. “At 580 Fifth Avenue, floor twelve. Once you’ve surrendered yourself, we’ll have our psychiatrists begin on you; we’ll have personality-profile tests made. We’ll attempt to determine your absolute, ultimate fantasy wish—then we’ll bring you back to Rekal, Incorporated, here; get them in on it, fulfilling that wish in vicarious surrogate retrospection. And—good luck. We do owe you something; you acted as a capable instrument for us.” The voice lacked malice; if anything, they—the organization—felt sympathy toward him.

“Thanks,” Quail said. And began searching for a robot cab.

“Mr. Quail,” the stern-faced, elderly Interplan psychiatrist said, “you possess a most interesting wish-fulfillment dream fantasy. Probably nothing such as you consciously entertain or suppose. This is commonly the way; I hope it won’t upset you too much to hear about it.”

The senior ranking Interplan officer present said briskly, “He better not be too much upset to hear about it, not if he expects not to get shot.”

“Unlike the fantasy of wanting to be an Interplan undercover agent,” the psychiatrist continued, “which, being relatively speaking a product of maturity, had a certain plausibility to it, this production is a grotesque dream of your childhood; it is no wonder you fail to recall it. Your fantasy is this: you are nine years old, walking alone down a rustic lane. An

unfamiliar variety of space vessel from another star system lands directly in front of you. No one on Earth but you, Mr. Quail, sees it. The creatures within are very small and helpless, somewhat on the order of field mice, although they are attempting to invade Earth; tens of thousands of other ships will soon be on their way, when this advance party gives the go-ahead signal."

"And I suppose I stop them," Quail said, experiencing a mixture of amusement and disgust. "Single-handed I wipe them out. Probably by stepping on them with my foot."

"No," the psychiatrist said patiently. "You halt the invasion, but not by destroying them. Instead, you show them kindness and mercy, even though by telepathy—their mode of communication—you know why they have come. They have never seen such humane traits exhibited by any sentient organism, and to show their appreciation they make a covenant with you."

Quail said, "They won't invade Earth as long as I'm alive."

"Exactly." To the Interplan officer the psychiatrist said, "You can see it does fit his personality, despite his feigned scorn."

"So by merely existing," Quail said, feeling a growing pleasure, "by simply being alive, I keep Earth safe from alien rule. I'm in effect, then, the most important person on Terra. Without lifting a finger."

"Yes, indeed, sir," the psychiatrist said. "And this is bedrock in your psyche; this is a life-long childhood fantasy. Which, without depth and drug therapy, you never would have recalled. But it has always existed in you; it went underneath, but never ceased."

To McClane, who sat intently listening, the senior police official said, "Can you implant an extra-factual memory pattern that extreme in him?"

"We get handed every possible type of wish-fantasy there is," McClane said. "Frankly, I've heard a lot worse than this. Certainly we can handle it. Twenty-four hours from now he won't just wish he'd saved Earth; he'll devoutly believe it really happened."

The senior police official said, “You can start the job, then. In preparation we’ve already once again erased the memory in him of his trip to Mars.”

Quail said, “What trip to Mars?”

No one answered him, so reluctantly, he shelved the question. And anyhow a police vehicle had now put in its appearance; he, McClane and the senior police officer crowded into it, and presently they were on their way to Chicago and Rekal, Incorporated.

“You had better make no errors this time,” the police officer said to heavyset, nervous-looking McClane.

“I can’t see what could go wrong,” McClane mumbled, perspiring. “This has nothing to do with Mars or Interplan. Single-handedly stopping an invasion of Earth from another star-system.” He shook his head at that. “Wow, what a kid dreams up. And by pious virtue, too; not by force. It’s sort of quaint.” He dabbed at his forehead with a large linen pocket handkerchief.

Nobody said anything.

“In fact,” McClane said, “it’s touching.”

“But arrogant,” the police official said starkly. “Inasmuch as when he dies the invasion will resume. No wonder he doesn’t recall it; it’s the most grandiose fantasy I ever ran across.” He eyed Quail with disapproval. “And to think we put this man on our payroll.”

When they reached Rekal, Incorporated the receptionist, Shirley, met them breathlessly in the outer office. “Welcome back, Mr. Quail,” she fluttered, her melon-shaped breasts—today painted an incandescent orange—bobbing with agitation. “I’m sorry everything worked out so badly before; I’m sure this time it’ll go better.”

Still repeatedly dabbing at his shiny forehead with his neatly folded Irish linen handkerchief, McClane said, “It better.” Moving with rapidity he

rounded up Lowe and Keeler, escorted them and Douglas Quail to the work area, and then, with Shirley and the senior police officer, returned to his familiar office. To wait.

“Do we have a packet made up for this, Mr. McClane?” Shirley asked, bumping against him in her agitation, then coloring modestly.

“I think we do.” He tried to recall, then gave up and consulted the formal chart. “A combination,” he decided aloud, “of packets Eighty-one, Twenty, and Six.” From the vault section of the chamber behind his desk he fished out the appropriate packets, carried them to his desk for inspection. “From Eight-one,” he explained, “a magic healing rod given him—the client in question, this time Mr. Quail—by the race of beings from another system. A token of their gratitude.”

“Does it work?” the police officer asked curiously.

“It did once,” McClane explained. “But he, ahem, you see, used it up years ago, healing right and left. Now it’s only a memento. But he remembers it working spectacularly.” He chuckled, then opened packet Twenty. “Document from the UN Secretary General thanking him for saving Earth; this isn’t precisely appropriate, because part of Quail’s fantasy is that no one knows of the invasion except himself, but for the sake of verisimilitude we’ll throw it in.” He inspected packet Six, then. What came from this? He couldn’t recall; frowning, he dug into the plastic bag as Shirley and the Interplan olice officer watched intently.

“Writing,” Shirley said. “In a funny language.”

“This tells who they were,” McClane said, “and where they came from. Including a detailed star map logging their flight here and the system of origin. Of course it’s in their script, so he can’t read it. But he remembers them reading it to him in his own tongue.” He placed the three artifacts in the center of the desk. “These should be taken to Quail’s conapt,” he said to the police officer. “So that when he gets home he’ll find them. And it’ll confirm his fantasy. SOP—standard operating procedure.” He chuckled apprehensively, wondering how matters were going with Lowe and Keeler.

The intercom buzzed. “Mr. McClane, I’m sorry to bother you.” It was Lowe’s voice; he froze as he recognized it, froze and became mute. “But something’s come up. Maybe it would be better if you came in here and supervised. Like before, Quail reacted well to the narkidrine; he’s unconscious, relaxed and receptive. But—” McClane sprinted for the work area.

On a hygienic bed Douglas Quail lay breathing slowly and regularly, eyes half-shut, dimly conscious of those around him.

“We started interrogating him,” Lowe said, white-faced. “To find out exactly when to place the fantasy-memory of him single-handedly having saved Earth. And strangely enough—”

“They told me not to tell,” Douglas Quail mumbled in a dull drug-saturated voice. “That was the agreement. I wasn’t even supposed to remember. But how could I forget an event like that?”

I guess it would be hard, McClane reflected. But you did—until now.

“They even gave me a scroll,” Quail mumbled, “of gratitude. I have it hidden in my conapt; I’ll show it to you.”

To the Interplan officer who had followed after him, McClane said, “Well, I offer the suggestion that you better not kill him. If you do they’ll return.”

“They also gave me a magic invisible destroying rod,” Quail mumbled, eyes totally shut now. “That’s how I killed that man on Mars you sent me to take out. It’s in my drawer along with the box of Martian maw-worms and dried-up plant life.”

Wordlessly, the Interplan officer turned and stalked from the work area.

I might as well put those packets of proof-artifacts away, McClane said to himself resignedly. He walked, step by step, back to his office. Including the citation from the UN Secretary General. After all—

The real one probably would not be long in coming.

A Game of Unchance

While rolling a fifty-gallon drum of water from the canal to his potato garden, Bob Turk heard the roar, glanced up into the haze of the midafternoon Martian sky and saw the great blue interplan ship.

In the excitement he waved. And then he read the words painted on the side of the ship and his joy became alloyed with care. Because this great pitted hull, now lowering itself to a rear-end landing, was a carny ship, come to this region of the fourth planet to transact business.

The painting spelled out:

FALLING STAR ENTERTAINMENT ENTERPRISES

PRESENTS

FREAKS, MAGIC, TERRIFYING STUNTS, AND WOMEN!

The final word had been painted largest of all.

I better go tell the settlement council, Turk realized. He left his water drum and trotted toward the shop-area, panting as his lungs struggled to take in the thin, weak air of this unnatural, colonized world. Last time a carnival had come to their area they had been robbed of most of their crops — accepted by the pitchmen in barter — and had wound up with nothing more than an armload of useless plaster figurines. It would not happen again. And yet —

He felt the craving within him, the need to be entertained. And they all felt this way; the settlement yearned for the bizarre. Of course the pitchmen knew this, preyed off this. Turk thought, If only we could keep our heads. Barter excess food and cloth-fibers, not what we need… not become like a lot of kids. But life in the colony world was monotonous. Carting water, fighting bugs, repairing fences, ceaselessly tinkering with the semi-autonomous robot farm machinery which sustained them… it wasn't enough; it had no — culture. No solemnity.

“Hey,” Turk called as he reached Vince Guest’s land; Vince sat aboard his one-cylinder plow, wrench in hand. “Hear the noise? Company! More sideshows, like last year — remember?”

“I remember,” Vince said, not looking up. “They got all my squash. The hell with traveling shows.” His face became dark.

“This is a different outfit,” Turk explained, halting. “I never saw them before; they’ve got a *blue* ship and it looks like it’s been everywhere. You know what we’re going to do? Remember our plan?”

“Some plan,” Vince said, closing the jaw of the wrench.

“Talent is talent,” Turk babbled, trying to convince — not merely Vince — but himself as well; he talked against his own alarm. “All right, so Fred’s sort of half-witted; his talent’s genuine, I mean, we’ve tried it out a million times, and why we didn’t use it against that carny last year I’ll never know. But now we’re organized. Prepared.”

Raising his head Vince said, “You know what that dumb kid will do? He’ll join the carny; he’ll leave with it and he’ll use his talent on their side — we can’t trust him.”

“I trust him,” Turk said, and hurried on toward the buildings of the settlement, the dusty, eroded gray structures directly ahead. Already he could see their council chairman, Hoagland Rae, busy at his store; Hoagland rented tired pieces of equipment to settlement members and they all depended on him. Without Hoagland’s contraptions no sheep would get sheared, no lambs would be distailed. It was no wonder that Hoagland had become their political — as well as economic — leader.

Stepping out onto the hard-packed sand, Hoagland shaded his eyes, wiped his wet forehead with a folded handkerchief and greeted Bob Turk. “Different outfit this time?” His voice was low.

“Right,” Turk said, his heart pounding. “And we can take them, Hoag! If we play it right; I mean, once Fred —”

“They’ll be suspicious,” Hoagland said thoughtfully. “No doubt other settlements have tried to use Psi to win. They may have one of those — what do you call them? — those anti-Psi folks with them. Fred’s a p-k and if they have an anti-p-k —” He gestured, showing his resignation.

“I’ll go tell Fred’s parents to get him from school,” Bob Turk panted. “It’d be natural for kids to show up right away; let’s close the school for this afternoon so Fred’s lost in the crowd, you know what I mean? He doesn’t *look* funny, not to me, anyhow.” He sniggered.

“True,” Hoagland agreed, with dignity. “The Costner boy appears quite normal. Yes, we’ll try; that’s what we voted to do anyhow, we’re committed. Go sound the surplus-gathering bell so these carny boys can see we’ve got good produce to offer — I want to see all those apples and walnuts and cabbages and squash and pumpkins piled up —” He pointed to the spot. “And an accurate inventory sheet, with three carbons, in my hands, within one hour.” Hoagland got out a cigar, lit up with his lighter. “Get going.” Bob Turk went.

As they walked through their south pasture, among the black-face sheep who chewed the hard, dry grass, Tony Costner said to his son, “You think you can manage it, Fred? If not, say so. You don’t have to.”

Straining, Fred Costner thought he could dimly see the carnival, far off, arranged before the upended interplan ship. Booths, shimmering big banners and metal streamers that danced in the wind … and the recorded music, or was it an authentic calliope? “Sure,” he muttered. “I can handle them; I’ve been practicing every day since Mr. Rae told me.” To prove it he caused a rock lying ahead of them to skim up, pass in an arc, start toward them at high speed and then drop abruptly back to the brown, dry grass. A sheep regarded it dully and Fred laughed.

A small crowd from the settlement, including children, had already manifested itself among the booths now being set up; he saw the cotton candy machine hard at work, smelled the frying popcorn, saw with delight a vast cluster of helium-filled balloons carried by a gaudily-painted dwarf wearing a hobo costume.

His father said quietly, “What you must look for, Fred, is the game which offers the really valuable prizes.”

“I know,” he said, and began to scan the booths. We don’t have a need for hula-hula dolls, he said to himself. Or boxes of salt water taffy.

Somewhere in the carnival lay the real spoils. It might be in the money-pitching board or the spinning wheel or the bingo table; anyhow it was there. He scented it, sniffed it. And hurried.

In a weak, strained voice his father said, “Um, maybe I’ll leave you, Freddy.” Tony had seen one of the girl platforms and had turned toward it, unable to take his eyes from the scene. One of the girls was already — but then the rumble of a truck made Fred Costner turn, and he forgot about the high-breasted, unclad girl on the platform. The truck was bringing the produce of the settlement, to be bartered in exchange for tickets.

The boy started toward the truck, wondering how much Hoagland Rae had decided to put up this time after the awful licking they had taken before. It looked like a great deal and Fred felt pride; the settlement obviously had full confidence in his abilities.

He caught then the unmistakable stench of Psi.

It emanated from a booth to his right and he turned at once in that direction. This was what the carny people were protecting, this one game which they did not feel they could afford to lose. It was, he saw, a booth in which one of the freaks acted as the target; the freak was a no-head, the first Fred had ever seen, and he stopped, transfixed.

The no-head had no head at all and his sense organs, his eyes and nose and ears, had migrated to other parts of his body beginning in the period before birth. For instance, his mouth gaped from the center of his chest, and from each shoulder an eye gleamed; the no-head was deformed but not deprived, and Fred felt respect for him. The no-head could see, smell and hear as good as anyone. But what exactly did he do in the game?

In the booth the no-head sat within a basket suspended above a tub of water. Behind the no-head Fred Costner saw a target and then he saw the heap of baseballs near at hand and he realized how the games worked; if the target were hit by a ball the no-head would plunge into the tub of water. And it was to prevent this that the carny had directed its Psi powers; the stench here was overpowering. He could not, however, tell from whom the stench came, the no-head or the operator of the booth or from a third person as yet unseen. The operator, a thin young woman wearing slacks and a sweater and tennis shoes, held a baseball toward Fred. “Ready to play, captain?” she demanded and smiled at him insinuatingly, as if it was utterly in the realm of the impossible that he might play and win.

“I’m thinking,” Fred said. He was scrutinizing the prizes. The no-head giggled and the mouth located in the chest said, “He’s thinking — I doubt that!” It giggled again and Fred flushed.

His father came up beside him. “Is this what you want to play?” he said. Now Hoagland Rae appeared; the two men flanked the boy, all three of them studying the prizes. What were they? Dolls, Fred thought. At least that was their appearance; the vaguely male, small shapes lay in rows on the shelves to the left of the booth’s operator. He could not for the life of him fathom the carny’s reasons for protecting these; surely they were worthless. He moved closer, straining to see…

Leading him off to one side Hoagland Rae said worriedly, “But even if we win, Fred, what do we get? Nothing we can use, just those plastic figurines. We can’t barter those with other settlements, even.” He looked disappointed; the corners of his mouth turned down dismally.

“I don’t think they’re what they seem,” Fred said. “But I don’t actually know what they are. Anyhow let me try, Mr. Rae; I know this is the one.” And the carny people certainly believed so.

“I’ll leave it up to you,” Hoagland Rae said, with pessimism; he exchanged glances with Fred’s father, than slapped the boy encouragingly on the back. “Let’s go,” he announced. “Do your best, kid.” The group of them — joined now by Bob Turk — made their way back to the booth in which the no-head sat with shoulder eyes gleaming.

“Made up your mind, people?” the thin stony-faced girl who operated the booth asked, tossing a baseball and recatching it.

“Here.” Hoagland handed Fred an envelope; it was the proceeds from the settlement’s produce, in the form of carny tickets — this was what they had obtained in exchange. This was all there was, now.

“I’ll try,” Fred said to the thin girl, and handed her a ticket.

The thin girl smiled, showing sharp, small teeth.

“Put me in the drink!” the no-head babbled. “Dunk me and win a valuable prize!” It giggled again, in delight.

That night, in the workshop behind his store, Hoagland Rae sat with a jeweler’s loupe in his right eye, examining one of the figurines which Tony Costner’s boy had won at the Falling Star Entertainment Enterprises carnival earlier in the day.

Fifteen of the figurines lay in a row against the far wall of Hoagland’s workshop.

With a tiny pair of pliers Hoagland pried open the back of the doll-like structure and saw, within, intricate wiring. “The boy was right,” he said to

Bob Turk, who stood behind him smoking a synthetic tobacco cigarette in jerky agitation. “It’s not a doll; it’s fully rigged. Might be UN property they stole; might even be a microrob. You know, one of those special automatic mechanisms the government uses for a million tasks from spying to reconstruct surgery for war vets.” Now, gingerly, he opened the front of the figurine.

More wiring, and the miniature parts which even under the loupe were exceedingly difficult to make out. He gave up; after all, his ability was limited to repairing power harvesting equipment and the like. This was just too much. Again he wondered exactly how the settlement could make use of these microrobs. Sell them back to the UN? And meanwhile, the carnival had packed up and gone. No way to find out from them what these were. “Maybe it walks and talks,” Turk suggested.

Hoagland searched for a switch on the figurine, found none. Verbal order? he wondered. “Walk,” he ordered it. The figurine remained inert. “I think we’ve got something here,” he said to Turk. “But —” He gestured. “It’ll take time; we’ve got to be patient.” Maybe if they took one of the figurines to M City, where the truly professional engineers, electronics experts and repairmen of all kinds could be found… but he wanted to do this himself; he distrusted the inhabitants of the one great urban area on the colony planet.

“Those carny people sure were upset when we won again and again,” Bob Turk chuckled. “Fred, he said that they were exerting their own Psi all the time and it completely surprised them that —”

“Be quiet,” Hoagland said. He had found the figurine’s power supply; now he needed only to trace the circuit until he came to a break. By closing the break he could start the mechanism into activity; it was — or rather it seemed — as simple as that.

Shortly, he found the interruption in the circuit. A microscopic switch, disguised as the belt buckle, of the figurine… exulting, Hoagland closed the

switch with his needle-nose pliers, set the figurine down on his workbench and waited.

The figurine stirred. It reached into a pouch-like construct hanging at it side, a sort of purse; from the pouch it brought a tiny tube, which it pointed at Hoagland.

“Wait,” Hoagland said feebly. Behind him Turk bleated and scuttled for cover. Something boomed in his face, a light that thrust him back; he shut his eyes and cried out in fright. *We’re being attacked!* he shouted, but his voice did not sound; he heard nothing. He was crying uselessly in a darkness which had no end. Groping, he reached out imploringly…

The settlement’s registered nurse was bending over him, holding a bottle of ammonia at his nostrils. Grunting, he managed to lift his head, open his eyes. He lay in his workshop; around him stood a ring of settlement adults, Bob Turk foremost, all with expressions of gray alarm.

“These dolls or whatever,” Hoagland managed to whisper. “Attacked us; be careful.” He twisted, trying to see the line of dolls which he had so carefully placed against the far wall. “I set one off prematurely,” he mumbled. “By completing the circuit; I tripped it so now we know.” And then he blinked.

The dolls were gone.

“I went for Miss Beason,” Bob Turk explained, “and when I got back they had disappeared. Sorry.” He looked apologetic, as if it were his personal fault. “But you were hurt; I was worried you were maybe dead.”

“Okay,” Hoagland said, pulling himself up; his head ached and he felt nauseated. “You did right. Better get that Costner kid in here, get his opinion.” He added, “Well, we’ve been taken. For the second year in a row. Only this time is worse.” This time, he thought, we won. We were better off last year when we merely lost.

He had an intimation of true foreboding.

Four days later, as Tony Costner hoed weeds in his squash garden, a stirring of the ground made him pause; he reached silently for the pitchfork, thinking, It's an m-gopher, down under, eating the roots. I'll get it. He lifted the pitchfork, and, as the ground stirred once more, brought the tines of the fork savagely down to penetrate the loose, sandy soil.

Something beneath the surface squeaked in pain and fright. Tony Costner grabbed a shovel, dug the dirt away. A tunnel lay exposed and in it, dying in a heap of quivering, pulsating fur, lay — as he had from long experience anticipated — a Martian gopher, its eyes glazed in agony, elongated fangs exposed.

He killed it, mercifully. And then bent down to examine it. Because something had caught his eye: a flash of metal.

The m-gopher wore a harness.

It was artificial, of course; the harness fitted snugly around the animal's thick neck. Almost invisible, hair-like wires passed from the harness and disappeared into the scalp of the gopher near the front of the skull.

"Lord," Tony Costner said, picking the gopher and its harness up and standing in futile anxiety, wondering what to do. Right away he connected this with the carnival dolls; they had gone off and done this, made this — the settlement, as Hoagland had said, was under attack.

He wondered what the gopher would have done had he not killed it.

The gopher had been up to something. Tunneling toward — his house!

Later, he sat beside Hoagland Rae in the workshop; Rae, with care, had opened the harness, inspected its interior.

“A transmitter,” Hoagland said, and breathed out noisily, as if his childhood asthma had returned. “Short range, maybe half a mile. The gopher was directed by it, maybe gave back a signal that told where it was and what it was doing. The electrodes to the brain probably connect with pleasure and pain areas… that way the gopher could be controlled.” He glanced at Tony Costner. “How’d you like to have a harness like that on you?”

“I wouldn’t,” Tony said, shivering. He wished, all at once, that he was back on Terra, overcrowded as it was; he longed for the press of the crowd, the smells and sounds of great throngs of men and women, moving along the hard sidewalks, among the lights. It occurred to him then, in a flash, that he had never really enjoyed it here on Mars. Far too lonely, he realized. I made a mistake. My wife; she made me come here.

It was a trifle late, however, to think that now.

“I guess,” Hoagland said stonily, “that we’d better notify the UN military police.” He went with dragging steps to the wallphone, cranked it, then dialed the emergency number. To Tony he said, half in apology, half in anger, “I can’t take responsibility for handling this, Costner; it’s too difficult.”

“It’s my fault too,” Tony said. “When I saw that girl, she had taken off the upper part of her garment and —”

“UN regional security office,” the phone declared, loudly enough for Tony Costner to hear it.

“We’re in trouble,” Hoagland said. And explained, then, about the Falling Star Entertainment Enterprises ship and what had happened. As he talked he wiped his streaming forehead with his handkerchief; he looked old and tired, and very much in need of a rest.

An hour later the military police landed in the middle of the settlement's sole street. A uniformed UN officer, middle-aged, with a briefcase, stepped out, glanced around in the yellow late-afternoon light, made out the sight of the crowd with Hoagland Rae placed officially in front. "You are General Mozart?" Hoagland said tentatively, holding his hand out.

"That's correct," the heavyset UN officer said, as they shook briefly. "May I see the construct, please?" He seemed a trifle disdainful of the somewhat grimy settlement people; Hoagland felt that acutely, and his sense of failure and depression burgeoned.

"Sure, General." Hoagland led the way to his store and the workshop in the rear.

After he had examined the dead m-gopher with its electrodes and harness, General Mozart said, "You may have won artifacts they did *not* want to give up, Mr. Rae. Their final — in other words actual — destination was probably not this settlement." Again his distaste showed, ill-disguised; who would want to bother this area? "But, and this is a guess, eventually Earth and the more populated regions. However, by your employment of a parapsychological bias on the ball-throwing game —" He broke off, glanced at his wristwatch. "We'll treat the fields in this vicinity with arsine gas, I think; you and your people will have to evacuate this whole region, as a matter of fact tonight; we'll provide a transport. May I use your phone? I'll order the transport — you assemble all your people." He smiled reflexively at Hoagland and then went to the telephone to place his call back to his office in M City.

"Livestock, too?" Rae said. "We can't sacrifice them." He wondered just how he was supposed to get their sheep, dogs and cattle into the UN transport in the middle of the night. What a mess, he thought dully.

"Of course livestock," General Mozart said unsympathetically, as if Rae were some sort of idiot.

The third steer driven aboard the UN transport carried a harness at its neck; the UN military policeman at the entrance hatch spotted it, shot the steer at once, summoned Hoagland to dispose of the carcass.

Squatting by the dead steer, Hoagland Rae examined the harness and its wiring. As with the m-gopher, the harness connected, by delicate leads, the brain of the animal to the sentient organism — whatever it was — which had installed the apparatus, located, he assumed, no farther than a mile from the settlement. What was this animal supposed to do? he wondered as he disconnected the harness. Gore one of us? Or — eavesdrop. More likely that; the transmitter within the harness hummed audibly; it was perpetually on, picking up all sounds in the vicinity. So they know we've brought in the military, Hoagland realized. And that we've detected two of these constructs, now.

He had a deep intuition that this meant the abolition of the settlement. This area would soon be a battleground between the UN military and the — whatever they were. Falling Star Entertainment Enterprises. He wondered where they were from. Outside the Sol System, evidently.

Kneeling momentarily beside him a blackjack — a black-clad UN secret police officer — said, "Cheer up. This tipped their hand; we could never prove those carnivals were hostile, before. Because of you they never made it to Terra. You'll be reinforced; don't give up." He grinned at Hoagland, then hurried off, disappearing into the darkness, where a UN tank sat parked.

Yes, Hoagland thought. We did the authorities a favor. And they'll reward us by moving massively into this area.

He had a feeling that the settlement would never be quite the same again, no matter what the authorities did. Because, if nothing else, the settlement had failed to solve its own problems; it had been forced to call for outside help. For the big boys.

Tony Costner gave him a hand with the dead steer; together they dragged it to one side, gasping for breath as they grappled with the still warm body. “I feel responsible,” Tony said, when they had set it down.

“Don’t.” Hoagland shook his head. “And tell your boy not to feel bad.”

“I haven’t seen Fred since this first came out,” Tony said miserably. “He took off, terribly disturbed. I guess the UN MPs will find him; they’re on the outskirts rounding everybody up.” He sounded numb, as if he could not quite take in what was happening. “An MP told me that by morning we could come back. The arsine gas would have taken care of everything. You think they’ve run into this before? They’re not saying but they seem so efficient. They seem so sure of what they’re doing.”

“Lord knows,” Hoagland said. He lit a genuine Earth-made Optimo cigar and smoked in glum silence, watching a flock of black-face sheep being driven into the transport. Who would have thought the legendary, classic invasion of Earth would take this form? he asked himself. Starting here at our meager settlement, in terms of small wired figurines, a little over a dozen in all, which we labored to win from Falling Star Entertainment Enterprises; as General Mozart said, the invaders didn’t even want to give them up. Ironic.

Bob Turk, coming up beside him, said quietly, “You realize we’re going to be sacrificed. That’s obvious. Arsine will kill all the gophers and rats but it won’t kill the microrobs because they don’t breathe. The UN will have to keep blackjack squads operating in this region for weeks, maybe months. This gas attack is just the beginning.” He turned accusingly to Tony Costner. “If your kid —”

“All right,” Hoagland said in a sharp voice. “That’s enough. If I hadn’t taken that one apart, closed the circuit — you can blame me, Turk; in fact I’ll be glad to resign. You can run the settlement without me.”

Through a battery-driven loudspeaker a vast UN voice boomed, “All persons within sound of my voice prepare to board! This area will be

flooded with poisonous gas at 14:00. I repeat —” It repeated, as the loudspeakers turned in first one direction and then another; the noise echoed in the night darkness.

Stumbling, Fred Costner made his way over the unfamiliar, rough terrain, wheezing in sorrow and weariness; he paid no attention to his location, made no effort to see where he was going. All he wanted to do was get away. He had destroyed the settlement and everyone from Hoagland Rae on down knew it. Because of him —

Far away, behind him, an amplified voice boomed, “All persons within sound of my voice prepare to board! This area will be flooded with poisonous gas at 14:00. I repeat, all persons within sound of my voice —” It dinned on and on. Fred continued to stumble along, trying to shut out the racket of the voice, hurrying away from it.

The night smelled of spiders and dry weeds; he sensed the desolation of the landscape around him. Already he was beyond the final perimeter of cultivation; he had left the settlement’s fields and now he stumbled over unplowed ground where no fences or even surveyor’s stakes existed. But they would probably flood this area, too, however; the UN ships would coast back and forth, spraying the arsine gas, and then after that special forces troops would come in, wearing gas-masks, carrying flame throwers, with metal-sensitive detectors on their backs, to roust out the fifteen microrobs which had taken refuge underground in the burrows of rats and vermin. Where they belong, Fred Costner said to himself. And to think I wanted them for the settlement; I thought, because the carnival wanted to keep them, that they must be valuable.

He wondered, dimly, if there was any way he could undo what he had done. Find the fifteen microrobs, plus the activated one which had almost killed Hoagland Rae? And — he had to laugh; it was absurd. Even if he found their hideout — assuming that all of them had taken refuge together in one spot — how could he destroy them? And they were armed. Hoagland Rae had barely escaped, and that had been from one acting alone.

A light glowed ahead.

In the darkness he could not make out the shapes which moved at the edge of the light; he halted, waited, trying to orient himself. Persons came and went and he heard the voices, muted, both men's and women's. And the sound of machinery in motion. The UN would not be sending out women, he realized. This was not the authorities.

A portion of the sky, the stars and faint nocturnal swath of haze, had been blotted out, and he realized all at once that he was seeing the outline of a large stationary object.

It could be a ship, parked on its tail, awaiting takeoff; the shape seemed roughly that.

He seated himself, shivering in the cold of the Martian night, scowling in an attempt to trace the passage of the indistinct forms busy with their activity. Had the carnival returned? Was this once more the Falling Star Entertainment Enterprises vehicle? Eerily, the thought came to him: the booths and banners and tents and platforms, the magic shows and girl platforms and freaks and games of chance were being erected here in the middle of the night, in this barren area lost in the emptiness between settlements. A hollow enactment of the festivity of the carny life, for no one to see or experience. Except — by chance — himself. And to him it was revolting; he had seen all he wanted of the carnival, its people and — things.

Something ran across his foot.

With his psychokinetic faculty he snared it, drew it back; reaching, he grabbed with both hands until all at once he had snatched out of the darkness a thrashing, hard shape. He held it, and saw with fright one of the microrobs; it struggled to escape and yet, reflexively, he held onto it. The microrob had been scurrying toward the parked ship, and he thought, the ship's picking them up. So they won't be found by the UN. They're getting away; then the carnival can go on with its plans.

A calm voice, a woman's, said from close by, "Put it down, please. It wants to go."

Jumping with shock he released the microrob and it scuttled off, rustling in the weeds, gone at once. Standing before Fred the thin girl, still wearing slacks and a sweater, faced him placidly, a flashlight in her hand; by its circle of illumination he made out her sharply-traced features, her colorless jaw and intense, clear eyes. "Hi," Fred said stammeringly; he stood up, defensively, facing the girl. She was slightly taller than he and he felt afraid of her. But he did not catch the stench of Psi about her and he realized that it had definitely not been she there in the booth who had struggled against his own faculty during the game. So he had an advantage over her, and perhaps one she did not know about.

"You better get away from here," he said. "Did you hear the loudspeaker? They're going to gas this area."

"I heard." The girl surveyed him. "You're the big winner, aren't you, sonny? The master gameplayer; you dunked our anti-ceph sixteen times in a row." She laughed merrily. "Simon was furious; he caught cold from that and blames you. So I hope you don't run into him."

"Don't call me sonny," he said. His fear began to leave him.

"Douglas, our p-k, says you're strong. You wrestled him down every time; congratulations. Well, how pleased are you with your take?" Silently, she once more laughed; her small sharp teeth shone in the meager light. "You feel you got your produce's worth?"

"Your p-k isn't much good," Fred said. "I didn't have any trouble and I'm really not experienced. You could do a lot better."

"With you, possibly? Are you asking to join us? Is this a proposition from you to me, little boy?"

“No!” he said, startled and repelled.

“There was a rat,” the girl said, “in the wall of your Mr. Rae’s workshop; it had a transmitter on it and so we knew about your call to the UN as soon as you made it. So we’ve had plenty of time to regain our —” She paused a moment. “Our merchandise. If we cared to. Nobody meant to hurt you; it isn’t our fault that busybody Rae stuck the tip of his screwdriver into the control-circuit of that one microrob. Is it?”

“He started the cycle prematurely. It would have done that eventually anyhow.” He refused to believe otherwise; he knew the settlement was in the right. “And it’s not going to do you any good to collect all those microrobs because the UN knows and —”

” ‘Collect’?” The girl rocked with amusement. “We’re not collecting the sixteen microrobs you poor little people won. We’re going ahead — you forced us to. The ship is unloading the rest of them.” She pointed with the flashlight and he saw in that brief instant the horde of microrobs disgorged, spreading out, seeking shelter like so many photophobic insects.

He shut his eyes and moaned.

“Are you still sure,” the girl said purringly, “that you don’t want to come with us? It’ll ensure your future, sonny. And otherwise —” She gestured. “Who knows? Who really can guess what’ll become of your tiny settlement and you poor tiny people?”

“No,” he said. “I’m still not coming.”

When he opened his eyes again the girl had gone off. She stood with the no-head, Simon, examining a clipboard which the no-head held.

Turning, Fred Costner ran back the way he had come, toward the UN military police.

The lean, tall, black-uniformed UN secret police general said, “I have replaced General Mozart who is unfortunately ill-equipped to deal with domestic subversion; he is a military man exclusively.” He did not extend his hand to Hoagland Rae. Instead he began to pace about the workshop, frowning. “I wish I had been called in last night. For example I could have told you one thing immediately… which General Mozart did not understand.” He halted, glanced searchingly at Hoagland. “You realize, of course, that you did not beat the carnival people. They wanted to lose those sixteen microrobs.”

Hoagland Rae nodded silently; there was nothing to say. It now did appear obvious, as the blackjack general had pointed out.

“Prior appearances of the carnival,” General Wolff said, “in former years, was to set you up, to set each settlement up in turn. They knew you’d have to plan to win this time. So this time they brought their microrobs. And had their weak Psi ready to engage in an ersatz ‘battle’ for supremacy.”

“All I want to know,” Hoagland said, “is whether we’re going to get protection.” The hills and plains surrounding the settlement, as Fred had told them, were now swarming with the microrobs; it was unsafe to leave the downtown buildings.

“We’ll do what we can.” General Wolff resumed pacing. “But obviously we’re not primarily concerned with you, or with any other particular settlement or locale that’s been infested. It’s the overall situation that we have to deal with. That ship has been forty places in the last twenty-four hours; how they’ve moved so swiftly —” He broke off. “They had every step prepared. And you thought you conned them.” He glowered at Hoagland Rae. “Every settlement along the line thought that as they won their boxload of microrobs.”

“I guess,” Hoagland said presently, “that’s what we get for cheating.” He did not meet the blackjack general’s gaze.

“That’s what you get for pitting your wits against an adversary from another system,” General Wolff said bitingly. “Better look at it that way. And the next time a vehicle *not* from Terra shows up — don’t try to mastermind a strategy to defeat them: *call us*.”

Hoagland Rae nodded. “Okay. I understand.” He felt only dull pain, not indignation; he deserved — they all deserved — this chewing out. If they were lucky their reprimand would end at this. It was hardly the settlement’s greatest problem. “What do they want?” he asked General Wolff. “Are they after this area for colonization? Or is this an economic —”

“Don’t try,” General Wolff said.

“P-pardon?”

“It’s not something you can understand, now or at any other time. We know what they’re after — and *they* know what they’re after. Is it important that you know, too? Your job is to try to resume your farming as before. Or if you can’t do that, pull back and return to Earth.”

“I see,” Hoagland said, feeling trivial.

“Your kids can read about it in the history books,” General Wolff said. “That ought to be good enough for you.”

“It’s just fine,” Hoagland Rae said, miserably. He seated himself halfheartedly at his workbench, picked up a screwdriver and began to tinker with a malfunctioning autonomic tractor guidance-turret.

“Look,” General Wolff said, and pointed.

In a corner of the workshop, almost invisible against the dusty wall, a microrob crouched watching them.

“Jeez!” Hoagland wailed, groping around on his workbench for the old .32 revolver which he had gotten out and loaded.

Long before his fingers found the revolver the microrob had vanished. General Wolff had not even moved; he seemed, in fact, somewhat amused: he stood with his arms folded, watching Hoagland fumbling with the antiquated side arm.

“We’re working on a central device,” General Wolff said, “which would cripple all of them simultaneously. By interrupting the flow of current from their portable power-packs. Obviously to destroy them one by one is absurd; we never even considered it. However —” He paused thoughtfully, his forehead wrinkling. “There’s reason to believe they — the outspacers — have anticipated us and have diversified the power-sources in such a way that —” He shrugged philosophically. “Well, perhaps something else will come to mind. In time.”

“I hope so,” Hoagland said. And tried to resume his repair of the defective tractor turret.

“We’ve pretty much given up the hope of holding Mars,” General Wolff said, half to himself.

Hoagland slowly set down his screwdriver, stared at the secret policeman.

“What we’re going to concentrate on is Terra,” General Wolff said, and scratched his nose reflectively.

“Then,” Hoagland said after a pause, “there’s really no hope for us here; that’s what you’re saying.”

The blackjack general did not answer. He did not need to.

As he bent over the faintly greenish, scummy surface of the canal where botflies and shiny black beetles buzzed, Bob Turk saw, from the corner of his vision, a small shape scuttle. Swiftly he spun, reached for his laser cane; he brought it up, fired it and destroyed — oh happy day! — a heap of rusted, discarded fuel drums, nothing more. The microrob had already departed.

Shakily he returned the laser cane to his belt and again bent over the bug-infested water. As usual the ‘robs had been active here during the night; his wife had seen them, heard their rat-like scratchings. What the hell had they done? Bob Turk wondered dismally, and sniffed long and hard at the water.

It seemed to him that the customary odor of the stagnant water was somehow subtly changed.

“Damn,” he said, and stood up, feeling futile. The ‘robs had put some contaminator in the water; that was obvious. Now it would have to be given a thorough chemical analysis and that would take days. Meanwhile, what would keep his potato crop alive? Good question.

Raging in baffled helplessness, he pawed the laser cane, wishing for a target — and knowing he could never, not in a million years, have one. As always the ‘robs did their work at night; steadily, surely, they pushed the settlement back.

Already ten families had packed up and taken passage for Terra. To resume — if they could — the old lives which they had abandoned.

And, soon, it would be his turn.

If only there was something they could do. Some way they could fight back. He thought, I’d do anything, give anything, for a chance to get those ‘robs. I swear it. I’d go into debt or bondage or servitude or anything, just for a *chance* of freeing the area of them.

He was shuffling morosely away from the canal, hands thrust deep in the pockets of his jacket, when he heard the booming roar of the intersystem ship overhead.

Calcified, he stood peering up, his heart collapsing inside him. Them back? he asked himself. The Falling Star Entertainment Enterprises ship… are they going to hit us all over again, finish us off finally? Shielding his eyes he peered frantically, not able even to run, his body not knowing its way even to instinctive, animal panic.

The ship, like a gigantic orange, lowered. Shaped like an orange, colored like an orange… it was not the blue tubular ship of the Falling Star people; he could see that. But also it was not from Terra; it was not UN. He had never seen a ship exactly like it before and he knew that he was definitely seeing another vehicle from beyond the Sol System, much more blatantly so than the blue ship of the Falling Star creatures. Not even a cursory attempt had been made to make it appear Terran.

And yet, on its sides, it had huge letters, which spelled out words in English.

His lips moving he read the words as the ship settled to a landing northeast of the spot at which he stood.

SIX SYSTEM EDUCATIONAL PLAYTIME ASSOCIATES

IN A RIOT OF FUN AND FROLIC FOR ALL!

It was — God in heaven — another itinerant carnival company.

He wanted to look away, to turn and hurry off. And yet he could not; the old familiar drive within him, the craving, the fixated curiosity, was too strong. So he continued to watch; he could see several hatches open and autonomic mechanisms beginning to nose, like flattened doughnuts, out onto the sand.

They were pitching camp.

Coming up beside him his neighbor Vince Guest said hoarsely, “Now what?”

“You can see.” Turk gestured frantically. “Use your eyes.” Already the auto-mechs were erecting a central tent; colored streamers hurled themselves upward into the air and then rained down on the still two-dimensional booths. And the first humans — or humanoids — were emerging. Vince and Bob saw men wearing bright clothing and then women in tights. Or rather something considerably less than tights.

“Wow,” Vince managed to say, swallowing. “You see those ladies? You ever seen women with such —”

“I see them,” Turk said. “But I’m never going back to one of these nonTerran carnivals from beyond the system and neither is Hoagland; I know that as well as I know my own name.”

How rapidly they were going to work. No time wasted; already faint, tinny music, of a carousel nature, filtered to Bob Turk. And the smells. Cotton candy, roasting peanuts, and with those the subtle smell of adventure and exciting sights, of the illicit. One woman with long braided red hair had hopped lithely up onto a platform; she wore a meager bra and wisp of silk at her waist and as he watched fixedly she began to practice her dance. Faster and faster she spun until at last, carried away by the rhythm, she discarded entirely what little she wore. And the funny thing about it all was that it seemed to him real art; it was not the usual carny shimmying at the midsection. There was something beautiful and alive about her movements; he found himself spellbound.

“I — better go get Hoagland,” Vince managed to say, finally. Already a few settlers, including a number of children, were moving as if hypnotized toward the lines of booths and the gaudy streamers that fluttered and shone in the otherwise drab Martian air.

“I’ll go over and get a closer look,” Bob Turk said, “while you’re locating him.” He started toward the carnival on a gradually accelerated run, scuffling sand as he hurried.

To Hoagland, Tony Costner said, “At least let’s *see* what they have to offer. You know they’re not the same people; it wasn’t them who dumped those horrible damn microrobs off here — you can see that.”

“Maybe it’s something worse,” Hoagland said, but he turned to the boy, Fred. “What do you say?” he demanded.

“I want to look,” Fred Costner said. He had made up his mind.

“Okay,” Hoagland said, nodding. “That’s good enough for me. It won’t hurt us to look. As long as we remember what that UN secret police general told us. Let’s not kid ourselves into imagining we can outsmart them.” He put down his wrench, rose from his workbench, and walked to the closet to get his fur-lined outdoor coat.

When they reached the carnival they found that the games of chance had been placed — conveniently — ahead of even the girly shows and the freaks. Fred Costner rushed forward, leaving the group of adults behind; he sniffed the air, took in the scents, heard the music, saw past the games of chance the first freak platform: it was his favorite abomination, one he remembered from previous carnivals, only this one was superior. It was a no-body. In the midday Martian sunlight it reposed quietly: a bodiless head complete with hair, ears, intelligent eyes; heaven only knew what kept it alive… in any case he knew intuitively that it was genuine.

“Come and see Orpheus, the head without a visible body!” the pitchman called through his megaphone, and a group, mostly children, had gathered in awe to gape. “How does it stay alive? How does it propel itself? Show them, Orpheus.” The pitchman tossed a handful of food pellets — Fred Costner could not see precisely what — at the head; it opened its mouth to enormous, frightening proportions, managed to snare most of what landed near it. The pitchman laughed and continued with his spiel. The no-body

was now rolling industriously after the bits of food which it had missed. Gee, Fred thought.

“Well?” Hoagland said, coming up beside him. “Do you see any games we might profit from?” His tone was drenched with bitterness. “Care to throw a baseball at anything?” He started away, then, not waiting, a tired little fat man who had been defeated too much, who had already lost too many times. “Let’s go,” he said to the other adults of the settlement. “Let’s get out of here before we get into another —”

“Wait,” Fred said. He had caught it, the familiar, pleasing stench. It came from a booth on his right and he turned at once in that direction.

A plump, gray-colored middle-aged woman stood in a ringtoss booth, her hands full of the light wicker rings.

Behind Fred his father said to Hoagland Rae, “You get the rings over the merchandise; you win whatever you manage to toss the ring onto so that it stays.” With Fred he walked slowly in that direction. “It would be a natural,” he murmured, “for a psychokinetic. I would think.”

“I suggest,” Hoagland said, speaking to Fred, “that you look more closely this time at the prizes. At the merchandise.” However, he came along, too.

At first Fred could not make out what the neat stacks were, each of them exactly alike, intricate and metallic; he came up to the edge of the booth and the middle-aged woman began her chant-like litany, offering him a handful of rings. For a dollar, or whatever of equal value the settlement had to offer.

“What are they?” Hoagland said, peering. “I — think they’re some kind of machines.”

Fred said, “I know what they are.” And we’ve got to play, he realized. We must round up every item in the settlement that we can possibly trade

these people, every cabbage and rooster and sheep and wool blanket.

Because, he realized, this is our chance. Whether General Wolff knows about it or likes it.

"My God," Hoagland said quietly. "Those are traps."

"That's right, mister," the middle-aged woman chanted. "Homeostatic traps; they do all the work, think for themselves, you just let them go and they travel and travel and they never give up until they catch —" She winked. "*You know what.* Yes, you know what they catch, mister, those little pesky things you can't ever possibly catch by yourselves, that are poisoning your water and killing your steers and ruining your settlement — win a trap, a valuable, useful trap, and you'll see, you'll see!" She tossed a wicker ring and it nearly settled over one of the complex, sleek-metal traps; it might very well have, if she had thrown it just a little more carefully. At least that was the impression given. They all felt this.

Hoagland said to Tony Costner and Bob Turk, "We'll need a couple hundred of them at least."

"And for that," Tony said, "we'll have to hock everything we own. But it's worth it; at least we won't be completely wiped out." His eyes gleamed "Let's get started " To Fred he said, "Can you play this game? Can you win?"

"I think so," Fred said. Although somewhere nearby, someone in the carnival was ready with a contrary power of psychokinesis. But not enough he decided. *Not quite enough.*

It was almost as if they worked it that way on purpose.

Not by its Cover

The elderly, cross-tempered president of Obelisk Books said irritably, “I don’t want to see him, Miss Handy. The item is already in print; if there’s an error in the text we can’t do anything about it now.”

“But Mr. Masters,” Miss Handy said, “it’s such an important error, sir. *If* he’s right. Mr. Brandice claims that the entire chapter —”

“I read his letter; I also talked to him on the vidphone. I know what he claims.” Masters walked to the window of his office, gazed moodily out at the arid, crater-marred surface of Mars which he had witnessed so many decades. *Five thousand copies printed and bound,* he thought. *And of that, half in gold-stamped Martian wub-fur. The most elegant, expensive material we could locate. We were already losing money on the edition, and now this.*

On his desk lay a copy of the book. Lucretius’ *De Rerum Natura,* in the lofty, noble John Dryden translation. Angrily, Barney Masters turned the crisp white pages. Who would expect anyone on Mars to know such an ancient text that well? he reflected. And the man waiting in the outer office consisted of only one out of eight who had written or called Obelisk Books about a disputed passage.

Disputed? There was no contest; the eight local Latin scholars were right. It was simply a question of getting them to depart quietly, to forget they had ever read through the Obelisk edition and found the fumbled-up passage in question.

Touching the button of his desk intercom, Masters said to his receptionist, “Okay; send him.” Otherwise the man would never leave; his

type would stay parked outside. Scholars were generally like that; they seemed to have infinite patience.

The door opened and a tall gray-haired man, wearing old-fashioned Terra-style glasses, loomed, briefcase in hand. “Thank you, Mr. Masters,” he said, entering. “Let me explain, sir, why my organization considers an error such as this so important.” He seated himself by the desk, unzipped his briefcase briskly. “We are after all a colony planet. All our values, mores, artifacts and customs come to us from Terra. WODAFAG considers your printing of this book…”

” ‘WODAFAG’?” Masters interrupted. He had never heard of it, but even so he groaned. Obviously one of the many vigilant crank outfits who scanned everything printed, either emanating locally here on Mars or arriving from Terra.

“Watchmen Over Distortion And Forged Artifacts Generally,” Brandice explained. “I have with me an authentic, correct Terran edition of *De Rerum Natura* — the Dryden translation, as is your local edition.” His emphasis on *local* made it sound slimy and second-rate; as if, Masters brooded, Obelisk Books was doing something unsavory in printing books at all. “Let us consider the inauthentic interpolations. You are urged to study first my copy —” He laid a battered, elderly, Terran-printed book open on Masters’ desk. “— in which it appears correctly. And then, sir, a copy of your own edition; the same passage.” Beside the little ancient blue book he laid one of the handsome large wub-fur bound copies which Obelisk Books had turned out.

“Let me get my copy editor in here,” Masters said. Pressing the intercom button he said to Miss Handy, “Ask Jack Snead to step in here, please.”

“Yes, Mr. Masters.”

“To quote from the authentic edition,” Brandice said, “we obtain a metric rendering of the Latin as follows. Ahem.” He cleared his throat self-consciously, then began to read aloud.

“From sense of grief and pain we shall be free;

We shall not feel, because we shall not be.

Though earth in seas, and seas in heaven were lost,

We should not move, we only should be toss’d.”

“I know the passage,” Masters said sharply, feeling needled; the man was lecturing him as if he were a child.

“This quatrain,” Brandice said, “is absent from your edition, and the following spurious quatrain — of God knows what origin — appears in its place. Allow me.” Taking the sumptuous, wub-fur bound Obelisk copy, he thumbed through, found the place; then read.

“From sense of grief and pain we shall be free;

Which earth-bound man can neither qualify nor see.

Once dead, we fathom seas cast up from this:

Our stint on earth doth herald an unstopping bliss.”

Glaring at Masters, Brandice closed the wub-fur bound copy noisily. “What is most annoying,” Brandice said, “is that this quatrain preaches a message diametric to that of the entire book. Where did it come from? *Somebody* had to write it; Dryden didn’t write it — Lucretius didn’t.” He eyed Masters as if he thought Masters personally had done it.

The office door opened and the firm’s copy editor, Jack Snead, entered. “He’s right,” he said resignedly to his employer. “And it’s only one alteration in the text out of thirty or so; I’ve been ploughing through the whole thing, since the letters started arriving. And now I’m starting in on other recent catalog-items in our fall list.” He added, grunting. “I’ve found alterations in several of them, too.”

Masters said, “You were the last editor to proofread the copy before it went to the typesetters. Were these errors in it then?”

“Absolutely not,” Snead said. “And I proofread the galleys personally; the changes weren’t in the galleys, either. The changes don’t appear until the final bound copies come into existence — if that makes any sense. Or more specifically, the ones bound in gold and wub-fur. The regular bound-in-boards copies — they’re okay.”

Masters blinked. “But they’re all the same edition. They ran through the presses together. In fact we didn’t originally plan an exclusive, higher-priced binding; it was only at the last minute that we talked it over and the business office suggested half the edition be offered in wub-fur.”

“I think,” Jack Snead said, “we’re going to have to do some close-scrutiny work on the subject of Martian wub-fur.”

An hour later aging, tottering Masters, accompanied by copy editor Jack Snead, sat facing Luther Saperstein, business agent for the pelt-procuring firm of Flawless, Incorporated; from them, Obelisk Books had obtained the wub-fur with which their books had been bound.

“First of all,” Masters said in a brisk, professional tone, “what is wub-fur?”

“Basically,” Saperstein said, “in the sense in which you’re asking the question, it is fur from the Martian wub. I know this doesn’t tell you much, gentlemen, but at least it’s a reference point, a postulate on which we can all agree, where we can start and build something more imposing. To be more helpful, let me fill you in on the nature of the wub itself. The fur is prized because, among other reasons, it is rare. Wub-fur is rare because a wub very seldom dies. By that I mean, it is next to impossible to slay a wub — even a sick or old wub. And, even though a wub is killed, the hide lives on. That quality imparts its unique value to home-decoration, or, as in your case, in the binding of lifetime, treasured books meant to endure.”

Masters sighed, dully gazed out the window as Saperstein droned on. Beside him, his copy editor made brief cryptic notes, a dark expression on his youthful, energetic face.

“What we supplied you,” Saperstein said, “when you came to us — and remember: you came to us; we didn’t seek you out — consisted of the most select, perfect hides in our giant inventory. These living hides shine with a unique luster all their own; nothing else either on Mars or back home on Terra resembles them. If torn or scratched, the hide repairs itself. It grows, over the months, a more and more lush pile, so that the covers of your volumes become progressively luxurious, and hence highly sought-after. Ten years from now the deep-pile quality of these wub-fur bound books —”

Interrupting, Snead said, “So the hide is still alive. Interesting. And the wub, as you say, is so deft as to be virtually impossible to kill.” He shot a swift glance at Masters. “Every single one of the thirty-odd alterations made in the texts in our books deals with immortality. The Lucretius revision is typical; the original text teaches that man is temporary, that even if he survives after death it doesn’t matter because he won’t have any memory of his existence here. In place of that, the spurious new passage comes out and flatly talks about a future of life predicated on this one; as you say, at complete variance with Lucretius’s entire philosophy. You realize what we’re seeing, don’t you? The damn wub’s philosophy superimposed on that of the various authors. That’s it; beginning and end.” He broke off, resumed his note-scratching, silently.

“How can a hide,” Masters demanded, “even a perpetually living one, exert influence on the contents of a book? A text already printed — pages cut, folios glued and sewed — it’s against reason. Even *if* the binding, the damn hide, is really alive, and I can hardly believe that.” He glared at Saperstein. “If it’s alive, what does it live on?”

“Minute particles of foodstuffs in suspension in the atmosphere,” Saperstein said, blandly.

Rising to his feet, Masters said, “Let’s go. This is ridiculous.”

“It inhales the particles,” Saperstein said, “through its pores.” His tone was dignified, even reproving.

Studying his notes, not rising along with his employer, Jack Snead said thoughtfully, “Some of the amended texts are fascinating. They vary from a complete reversal of the original passage — and the author’s meaning — as in the case of Lucretius, to very subtle, almost invisible corrections — if that’s the word — to texts more in accord with the doctrine of eternal life. The real question is this. Are we faced merely with the opinion of one particular life form, *or does the wub know what it’s talking about?* Lucretius’s poem, for instance; it’s very great, very beautiful, very interesting — as poetry. But as philosophy, maybe it’s wrong. I don’t know. It’s not my job; I simply edit books; I don’t write them. The last thing a good copy editor does is editorialize, on his own, in the author’s text. But that is what the wub, or anyhow the post-wub pelt, is doing.” He was silent, then.

Saperstein said, “I’d be interested to know if it added anything of value.”

“Poetically? Or do you mean philosophically? From a poetic or literary, stylistic point of view its interpolations are no better and no worse than the originals; it manages to blend in with the author well enough so that if you didn’t know the text already you’d never notice.” He added broodingly, “You’d never know it was a pelt talking.”

“I meant from a philosophical point of view.”

“Well, it’s always the same message, monotonously ground out. There is no death. We go to sleep; we wake up — to a better life. What it did to *De Rerum Natura*; that’s typical. If you’ve read that you’ve read them all.”

“It would be an interesting experiment,” Masters said thoughtfully, “to bind a copy of the Bible in wub-fur.”

“I had that done,” Snead said.

“And?”

“Of course I couldn’t take time to read it all. But I did glance over Paul’s letters to the Corinthians. It made only one change. The passage that begins, ‘Behold, I tell you a mystery —’ it set all of that in caps. And it repeated the lines, ‘Death, where is thy sting? Grave, where is thy victory?’ ten times straight; ten whole times, all in caps. Obviously the wub agreed; that’s its own philosophy, or rather theology.” He said, then, weighing each word, “This basically is a theological dispute… between the reading public and the hide of a Martian animal that looks like a fusion between a hog and a cow. Strange.” Again he returned to his notes.

After a solemn pause, Masters said, “You think the wub has inside information or don’t you? As you said, this may not be just the opinion of one particular animal that’s been successful in avoiding death; it may be the truth.”

“What occurs to me,” Snead said, “is this. The wub hasn’t merely learned to avoid death; it’s actually done what it preaches. By getting killed, skinned, and its hide — still alive — made into book covers — it has conquered death. It lives on. In what it appears to regard as a better life. We’re not just dealing with an opinionated local life form; we’re dealing with an organism that has already done what we’re still in doubt about. Sure it knows. It’s a living confirmation of its own doctrine. The facts speak for themselves. I tend to believe it.”

“Maybe continual life for *it*,” Masters disagreed, “but that doesn’t mean necessarily for the rest of us. The wub, as Mr. Saperstein points out, is unique. The hide of no other life form either on Mars or on Luna or Terra lives on, imbibing life from microscopic particles in suspension in the atmosphere. Just because *it* can do it —”

“Too bad we can’t communicate with a wub hide,” Saperstein said. “We’ve tried, here at Flawless, ever since we first noticed the fact of its post-mortem survival. But we never found a way.”

“But we at Obelisk,” Snead pointed out, “have. As a matter of fact I’ve already tried an experiment. I had a one-sentence text printed up, a single line reading: ‘The wub, unlike every other living creature, is immortal.’

“I then had it bound in wub-fur; then I read it again. It had been changed. Here.” He passed a slim book, handsomely appointed, to Masters. “Read it as it is now.”

Masters read aloud: “The wub, like every other living creature, is immortal.”

Returning the copy to Snead he said, “Well, all it did was drop out the *un;* that’s not much of a change, two letters.”

“But from the standpoint of meaning,” Snead said, “it constitutes a bombshell. We’re getting feedback from beyond the grave — so to speak. I mean, let’s face it; wub-fur is technically dead because the wub that grew it is dead. This is awfully damn close to providing an indisputable verification of the survival of sentient life after death.”

“Of course there is one thing,” Saperstein said hesitantly. “I hate to bring it up; I don’t know what bearing it has on all this. But the Martian wub, for all its uncanny — even miraculous — ability to preserve itself, is from a mentational standpoint a stupid creature. A Terran opossum, for example, has a brain one-third that of a cat. The wub has a brain one-fifth that of an opossum.” He looked gloomy.

“Well,” Snead said, “the Bible says. ‘The last shall be the first.’ Possibly the lowly wub is included under this rubric; let’s hope so.”

Glancing at him, Masters said, “You *want* eternal life?”

“Certainly,” Snead said. “Everybody does.”

“Not I,” Masters said, with decisiveness. “I have enough troubles now. The last thing I want is to live on as the binding of a book — or in any fashion whatsoever.” But inside, he had begun silently to muse. Differently. Very differently, in fact.

“It sounds like something a wub would like,” Saperstein agreed. “Being the binding of a book; just lying there supine, on a shelf, year after year, inhaling minute particles from the air. And presumably meditating. Or whatever wubs do after they’re dead.”

“They think theology,” Snead said. “They preach.” To his boss he said, “I assume we won’t be binding any more books in wub-fur.”

“Not for trade purposes,” Masters agreed. “Not to sell. But —” He could not rid himself of the conviction that some use lay, here. “I wonder,” he said, “if it would impart the same high level of survival factor to anything it was made into. Such as window drapes. Or upholstery in a float-car; maybe it would eliminate death on the commuter paths. Or helmet-liners for combat troops. And for baseball players.” The possibilities, to him, seemed enormous… but vague. He would have to think this out, give it a good deal of time.

“Anyhow,” Saperstein said, “my firm declines to give you a refund; the characteristics of wub-fur were known publicly in a brochure which we published earlier this year. We categorically stated —”

“Okay, it’s our loss,” Masters said irritably, with a wave of his hand. “Let it go.” To Snead he said, “And it definitely says, in the thirty-odd passages it’s interpolated, that life after death is pleasant?”

“Absolutely. ‘Our stint on earth doth herald an unstopping bliss.’ That sums it up, that line it stuck into *De Rerum Natura;* it’s all right there.”

” ‘Bliss,’ ” Masters echoed, nodding. “Of course, we’re actually not on Earth; we’re on Mars. But I suppose it’s the same thing; it just means life, wherever it’s lived.” Again, even more gravely, he pondered. “What occurs to me,” he said thoughtfully, “is it’s one thing to talk abstractly about ‘life after death.’ People have been doing that for fifty thousand years; Lucretius was, two thousand years ago. What interests me more is not the big overall philosophical picture but the concrete fact of the wub-pelt; the immortality which it carried around with it.” To Snead he said, “What other books did you bind in it?”

“Tom Paine’s *Age of Reason*,” Snead said, consulting his list.

“What were the results?”

“Two-hundred-sixty-seven blank pages. Except right in the middle the one word *bleh*.”

“Continue.”

“The *Britannica.* It didn’t precisely change anything, but it added whole articles. On the soul, on transmigration, on hell, damnation, sin, or immortality; the whole twenty-four volume set became religiously oriented.” He glanced up. “Should I go on?”

“Sure,” Masters said, listening and meditating simultaneously.

“The *Summa Theologica* of Thomas Aquinas. It left the text intact, but it periodically inserted the biblical line, ‘The letter killeth but the spirit giveth life.’ Over and over again.

“James Hilton’s *Lost Horizon.* Shangri-La turns out to be a vision of the after life which —”

“Okay,” Masters said. “We get the idea. The question is, what can we do with this? Obviously we can’t bind books with it — at least books which it disagrees with.” But he was beginning to see another use; a much more personal one. And it far outweighed anything which the wub-fur might do for or to books — in fact for any inanimate object.

As soon as he got to a phone —

“Of special interest,” Snead was saying, “is its reaction to a volume of collected papers on psychoanalysis by some of the greatest living Freudian analysts of our time. It allowed each article to remain intact, but at the end of each it added the same phrase.” He chuckled.” ‘Physician, heal thyself.’ Bit of a sense of humor, there.”

“Yeah,” Masters said. Thinking, unceasingly, of the phone and the one vital call which he would make.

Back in his own office at Obelisk Books, Masters tried out a preliminary experiment — to see if this idea would work. Carefully, he wrapped a Royal Albert yellow bone-china cup and saucer in wub-fur, a favorite from his own collection. Then, after much soul-searching and trepidation, he placed the bundle on the floor of his office and, with all his declining might, stepped on it.

The cup did not break. At least it did not seem to.

He unwrapped the package, then and inspected the cup. He had been right; wrapped in living wub-fur it could not be destroyed.

Satisfied, he seated himself at his desk, pondered one last time.

The wrapper of wub-fur had made a temporary, fragile object imperishable. So the wub’s doctrine of external survival had worked itself out in practice — exactly as he had expected.

He picked up the phone, dialed his lawyer’s number.

“This is about my will,” he said to his lawyer, when he had him on the other end of the line. “You know, the latest one I made out a few months ago. I have an additional clause to insert.”

“Yes, Mr. Masters,” his lawyer said briskly. “Shoot.”

“A small item,” Masters purred. “Has to do with my coffin. I want it mandatory on my heirs — my coffin is to be lined throughout, top, bottom and sides, with wub-fur. From Flawless, Incorporated. I want to go to my Maker clothed, so to speak, in wub-fur. Makes a better impression that way.” He laughed nonchalantly, but his tone was deadly serious — and his attorney caught it.

“If that’s what you want,” the attorney said.

“And I suggest you do the same,” Masters said.

“Why?”

Masters said, “Consult the complete home medical reference library we’re going to issue next month. And make certain you get a copy that’s bound in wub-fur; it’ll be different from the others.” He thought, then, about his wub-fur-lined coffin once again. Far underground, with him inside it, with the living wub-fur growing, growing.

It would be interesting to see the version of himself which a choice wub-fur binding produced.

Especially after several centuries.

Return Match

It was not an ordinary gambling casino. And this, for the police of S.L.A., posed a special problem. The outspacers who had set up the casino had placed their massive ship directly above the tables, so that in the event of a raid the jets would destroy the tables. Efficient, officer Joseph Tinbane thought to himself morosely. With one blast the outspacers left Terra and simultaneously destroyed all evidence of their illegal activity.

And, what was more, killed each and every human gameplayer who might otherwise have lived to give testimony.

He sat now in his parked aircar, taking pinch after pinch of fine imported Dean Swift Inch-kenneth snuff, then switched to the yellow tin which contained Wren's Relish. The snuff cheered him, but not very much. To his left, in the evening darkness, he could make out the shape of the outspacers' upended ship, black and silent, with the enlarged walled space beneath it, equally dark and silent — but deceptively so.

"We can go in there," he said to his less experienced companion, "but it'll just mean getting killed." We'll have to trust the robots, he realized. Even if they are clumsy, prone to error. Anyhow they're not alive. And not being alive, in a project as this, constituted an advantage.

"The third has gone in," officer Falkes beside him said quietly.

The slim shape, in human clothing, stopped before the door of the casino, rapped, waited. Presently the door opened. The robot gave the proper codeword and was admitted.

"You think they'll survive the takeoff blast?" Tinbane asked. Falkes was an expert in robotics.

“Possibly one might. Not all, though. But one will be enough.” Hot for the kill, officer Falkes leaned to peer past Tinbane; his youthful face was fixed in concentration. “Use the bull-horn now. Tell them they’re under arrest. I see no point in waiting.”

“The point I see,” Tinbane said, “is that it’s more comforting to see the ship inert and the action going on underneath. We’ll wait.”

“But no more robots are coming.”

“Wait for them to send back their vid transmissions,” Tinbane said. After all, that comprised evidence — of a sort. And at police HQ.it was now being recorded in permanent form. Still, his companion officer assigned to this project did have a point. Since the last of the three humanoid plants had gone in, nothing more would take place, now. Until the outspacers realized they had been infiltrated and put their typical planned pattern of withdrawal into action. “All right,” he said, and pushed down on the button which activated the bull-horn.

Leaning, Falkes spoke into the bull-horn. At once the bull-horn said, “AS ORDER-REPRESENTATIVES OF SUPERIOR LOS ANGELES I AND THE MEN WITH ME INSTRUCT EVERYONE INSIDE TO COME OUT ONTO THE STREET COLLECTIVELY; I FURTHER INSTRUCT __”

His voice, from the bull-horn, disappeared as the initial takeoff surge roared through the primary jets of the outspacers’ ship. Falkes shrugged, grinned starkly at Tinbane. *It didn’t take them long,* his mouth formed silently.

As expected no one came out. No one in the casino escaped. Even when the structure which composed the building melted. The ship detached itself, leaving a soggy, puddled mass of wax-like matter behind it. And still no one emerged.

All dead, Tinbane realized with mute shock.

“Time to go in,” Falkes said stoically. He began to crawl into his neo-asbestos suit, and, after a pause, so did Tinbane.

Together, the two officers entered the hot, dripping puddle which had been the casino. In the center, forming a mound, lay two of the three humanoid robots; they had managed at the last moment to cover something with their bodies. Of the third Tinbane saw no sign; evidently it had been demolished along with everything else. Everything organic.

I wonder what they thought — in their own dim way — to be worth preserving, Tinbane thought as he surveyed the distorted remnants of the two robots. Something alive? One of the snail-like outspacers? Probably not. A gaming table, then.

“They acted fast,” Falkes said, impressed. “For robots.”

“But we got something,” Tinbane pointed out. Gingerly, he poked at the hot fused metal which had been the two robots. A section, mostly likely a torso, slid aside, revealed what the robots had preserved.

A pinball machine.

Tinbane wondered why. What was this worth? Anything? Personally, he doubted it.

In the police lab on Sunset Avenue in downtown Old Los Angeles, a technician presented a long written analysis to Tinbane.

“Tell me orally,” Tinbane said, annoyed; he had been too many years on the force to suffer through such stuff. He returned the clipboard and report to the tall, lean police technician.

“Actually it’s not an ordinary construct,” the technician said, glancing over his own report, as if he had already forgotten it; his tone, like the report itself, was dry, dull. This for him was obviously routine. He, too, agreed that the pinball machine salvaged by the humanoid robots was worthless — or so Tinbane guessed. “By that I mean it’s not like any they’ve brought to Terra in the past. You can probably get more of an idea directly from the thing; I suggest you put a quarter in it and play through a game.” He added, “The lab budget will provide you with a quarter which we’ll retrieve from the machine later.”

“I’ve got my own quarter,” Tinbane said irritably. He followed the technician through the large, overworked lab, past the elaborate — and in many cases obsolete — assortment of analytical devices and partly broken-apart constructs to the work area in the rear.

There, cleaned up, the damage done to it now repaired, stood the pinball machine which the robots had protected. Tinbane inserted a coin; five metal balls at once spilled into the reservoir, and the board at the far end of the machine lit up in a variety of shifting colors.

“Before you shoot the first ball,” the technician said to him, standing beside him so that he, too, could watch, “I advise you to take a careful look at the terrain of the machine, the components among which the ball will pass. The horizontal area beneath the protective glass is somewhat interesting. A miniature village, complete with houses, lighted streets, major public buildings, overhead sprintship runnels… not a Terran village, of course. An Ionian village, of the sort they’re used to. The detail work is superb.”

Bending, Tinbane peered. The technician was right; the detail work on the scale-model structures astounded him.

“Tests that measure wear on the moving parts of this machine,” the technician informed him, “indicate that it saw a great deal of use. There is considerable tolerance. We estimate that before another thousand games

could be completed, the machine would have to go the shop. *Their shop,* back on Io. Which is where we understand they build and maintain equipment of this variety." He explained, "By that I mean gambling layouts in general."

"What's the object of the game?" Tinbane asked.

"We have here," the technician explained, "what we call a full-shift set variable. In other words, the terrain through which the steel ball moves is never the same. The number of possible combinations is —" he leafed through his report but was unable to find the exact figure — "anyhow, quite great. In the millions. It's excessively intricate, in our opinion. Anyhow, if you'll release the first ball you'll see."

Depressing the plunger, Tinbane allowed the first ball to roll from the reservoir and against the impulse-shaft. He then drew back the springloaded shaft and snapped it into release. The ball shot up the channel and bounced free, against a pressure-cushion which imparted swift additional velocity to it.

The ball now dribbled in descent, toward the upper perimeter of the village.

"The initial defense line," the technician said from behind him, "which protects the village proper, is a series of mounds colored, shaped and surfaced to resemble the Ionian landscape. The fidelity is quite obviously painstaking. Probably made from satellites in orbit around Io. You can easily imagine you're seeing an actual piece of that moon from a distance of ten or more miles up."

The steel ball encountered the perimeter of rough terrain. Its trajectory altered, and the ball wobbled uncertainly, no longer going in any particular direction.

"Deflected," Tinbane said, noting how satisfactorily the contours of the terrain acted to deprive the ball of its descending forward motion. "It's

going to bypass the village entirely.”

The ball, with severely decreased momentum, wandered into a side crease, followed the crease listlessly, and then, just as it appeared to be drifting into the lower take-up slot, abruptly hurtled from a pressure-cushion and back into play.

On the illuminated background a score registered. Victory, of a momentary sort, for the player. The ball once again menaced the village. Once again it dribbled through the rough terrain, following virtually the same path as before.

“Now you’ll notice something moderately important,” the technician said. “As it heads toward that same pressure-cushion which it just now hit. Don’t watch the ball; watch the cushion.”

Tinbane watched. And saw, from the cushion, a tiny wisp of gray smoke. He turned inquiringly toward the technician.

“Now watch the ball!” the technician said sharply.

Again the ball struck the pressure-cushion mounted slightly before the lower take-up slot. This time, however, the cushion failed to react to the ball’s impact.

Tinbane blinked as the ball rolled harmlessly on, into the take-up slot and out of play.

“Nothing happened,” he said presently.

“That smoke that you saw. Emerging from the wiring of the cushion. An electrical short. Because a rebound from that spot placed the ball in a menacing position — menacing to the village.”

“In other words,” Tinbane said, “something took note of the effect the cushion was having on the ball. The assembly operates so as to protect itself from the ball’s activity.” He had seen this before, in other outspacer gambling gear: sophisticated circuitry which kept the gameboard constantly shifting in such a way as to seem alive — in such a way as to reduce the chances of the player winning. On this particular construct the player obtained a winning score by inducing the five steel balls to pass into the central layout: the replica of the Ionian hamlet. Hence the hamlet had to be protected. Hence this particular strategically located pressure-cushion required elimination. At least for the time being. Until the overall configurations of topography altered decidedly.

“Nothing new there,” the technician said. “You’ve seen it a dozen times before; I’ve seen it a hundred times before. Let’s say that this pinball machine has seen ten thousand separate games, and each time there’s been a careful readjustment of the circuitry directed toward rendering the steel balls neutralized. Let’s say that the alterations are cumulative. So by now any given player’s score is probably no more than a fraction of early scores, before the circuits had a chance to react. The direction of alteration — as in all outspacer gambling mechanisms — has a zero win factor as the limit toward which it’s moving. Just *try* to hit the village, Tinbane. We set up a constantly repeating mechanical ball-release and played one hundred and forty games. At no time did a ball ever get near enough to do the village any harm. We kept a record of the scores obtained. A slight but significant drop was registered each time.” He grinned.

“So?” Tinbane said,.

“So nothing. As I told you and as my report says.” The technician paused, then. “Except for one thing. Look at this.”

Bending, he traced his thin finger across the protective glass of the layout, toward a construct near the center of the replica village. “A photographic record shows that with each game that particular component becomes more articulated. It’s being erected by circuitry underneath —

obviously. As is every other change. But this configuration — doesn't it remind you of something?"

"Looks like a Roman catapult," Tinbane said. "But with a vertical rather than a horizontal axis."

"That's our reaction, too. And look at the sling. In terms of the scale of the village it's inordinately large. Immense, in fact; specifically, *it's not to scale*."

"It looks as if it would almost hold —"

"Not almost," the technician said. "We measured it. The size of the sling is exact; one of those steel balls would fit perfectly into it."

"And then?" Tinbane said, feeling chill.

"And then it would hurl the ball back at the player," the lab technician said calmly. "It's aimed directly toward the front of the machine, front and upward." He added, "And it's been virtually completed."

The best defense, Tinbane thought to himself as he studied the outspacers' illegal pinball machine, is offense. But whoever heard of it in this context?

Zero, he realized, isn't a low enough score to suit the defensive circuitry of the thing. Zero won't do. It's got to strive for less than zero. Why? Because, he decided, it's not really moving toward zero as a limit; it's moving, instead, toward the best defensive pattern. It's too well designed. Or is it?

"You think," he asked the lean, tall lab technician, "that the outspacers intended this?"

“That doesn’t matter. At least not from the immediate standpoint. What matters is two factors: the machine was exported — in violation of Terran law — to Terra, and it’s been played by Terrans. Intentionally or not, this could be, in fact will soon be, a lethal weapon.” He added, “We calculate within the next twenty games. Every time a coin is inserted, the building resumes. Whether a ball gets near the village or not. All it requires is a flow of power from the device’s central helium battery. And that’s automatic, once play begins.” He added, “It’s at work building the catapult right now, as we stand here. You better release the remaining four balls, so it’ll shut itself off. Or give us permission to dismantle it — to at least take the power supply out of the circuit.”

“The outspacers don’t have a very high regard for human life,” Tinbane reflected. He was thinking of the carnage created by the ship taking off. And that, for them, was routine. But in view of that wholesale destruction of human life, this seemed unnecessary. What more did this accomplish?

Pondering, he said, “This is selective. This would eliminate only the gameplayer.”

The technician said, “This would eliminate *every* gameplayer. One after another.”

“But who would play the thing,” Tinbane said, “after the first fatality?”

“People go there knowing that if there’s a raid the outspacers will burn up everyone and everything,” the technician pointed out. “The urge to gamble is an addictive compulsion; a certain type of person gambles no matter what the risk is. You ever hear of Russian Roulette?”

Tinbane released the second steel ball, watched it bounce and wander toward the replica village. This one managed to pass through the rough terrain; it approached the first house comprising the village proper. Maybe I’ll get it, he thought savagely. Before it gets me. A strange, novel excitement filled him as he watched the ball thud against the tiny house,

flatten the structure and roll on. The ball, although small to him, towered over every building, every structure, that made up the village.

— Every structure except the central catapult. He watched avidly as the ball moved dangerously close to the catapult, then, deflected by a major public building, rolled on and disappeared into the take-up slot. Immediately he sent the third ball hurtling up its channel.

“The stakes,” the technician said softly, “are high, aren’t they? Your life against its. Must be exceptionally appealing to someone with the right kind of temperament.”

“I think,” Tinbane said, “I can get the catapult before it’s in action.”

“Maybe. Maybe not.”

“I’m getting the ball closer to it each time.”

The technician said, “For the catapult to work, it requires one of the steel balls; that’s its load. You’re making it increasingly likely that it’ll acquire use of one of the balls. You’re actually helping it.” He added somberly, “In fact it can’t function without you; the gameplayer is not only the enemy, he’s also essential. Better quit, Tinbane. The thing is using you.”

“I’ll quit,” Tinbane said, “when I’ve gotten the catapult.”

“You’re damn right you will. You’ll be dead.” He eyed Tinbane narrowly. “Possibly this is why the outspacers built it. To get back at us for our raids. This very likely is what it’s for.”

“Got another quarter?” Tinbane said.

In the middle of his tenth game a surprising, unexpected alteration in the machine’s strategy manifested itself. All at once it ceased routing the steel balls entirely to one side, away from the replica village.

Watching, Tinbane saw the steel ball roll directly — for the first time — through the center. Straight toward the proportionally massive catapult.

Obviously the catapult had been completed.

"I outrank you, Tinbane," the lab technician said tautly. "And I'm ordering you to quit playing."

"Any order from you to me," Tinbane said, "has to be in writing and has to be approved by someone in the department at inspector level." But, reluctantly, he halted play. "I can get it," he said reflectively, "but not standing here. I have to be away, far enough back so that it can't pick me off." So it can't distinguish me and aim, he realized.

Already he had noted it swivel slightly. Through some lens-system it had detected him. Or possibly it was thermotropic, had sensed him by his body heat.

If the latter, then defensive action for him would be relatively simple: a resistance coil suspended at another locus. On the other hand it might be utilizing a cephalic index of some sort, recording all nearby brain-emanations. But the police lab would know that already.

"What's its tropism?" he asked.

The technician said, "That assembly hadn't been built up, at the time we inspected it. It's undoubtedly coming into existence now, in concert with the completion of the weapon."

Tinbane said thougtfully, "I hope it doesn't possess equipment to *record* a cephalic index." Because, he thought, if it did, storing the pattern would be no trouble at all. It could retain a memory of its adversary for use in the event of future encounters.

Something about that notion frightened him — over and above the immediate menace of the situation.

"I'll make a deal," the technician said. "You continue to operate it until it fires its initial shot at you. Then step aside and let us tear it down. We need to know its tropism; this may turn up again in a more complex fashion. You agree? You'll be taking a calculated risk, but I believe its initial shot will be aimed with the idea of use as feedback; it'll correct for a second shot… which will never take place."

Should he tell the technician his fear?

"What bothers me," he said, "is the possibility that it'll retain a specific memory of me. For future purposes."

"What future purposes? It'll be completely torn down. As soon as it fires."

Reluctantly, Tinbane said, "I think I'd better make the deal." I may already have gone too far, he thought. You may have been right.

The next steel ball missed the catapult by only a matter of a fraction of an inch. But what unnerved him was not the closeness; it was the quick, subtle attempt on the part of the catapult to snare the ball as it passed. A motion so rapid that he might easily have overlooked it.

"It wants the ball," the technician observed. "It wants *you*." He, too, had seen.

With hesitation, Tinbane touched the plunger which would release the next — and for him possibly the last — steel ball.

"Back out," the technician advised nervously. "Forget the deal; stop playing. We'll tear it down as it is."

“We need the tropism,” Tinbane said. And depressed the plunger.

The steel ball, suddenly seeming to him huge and hard and heavy, rolled unhesitatingly into the waiting catapult; every contour of the machine’s topography collaborated. The acquisition of the load took place before he even understood what had happened. He stood staring.

“Run!” The technician leaped back, bolted; crashing against Tinbane, he threw him bodily away from the machine.

With a clatter of broken glass the steel ball shot by Tinbane’s right temple, bounced against the far wall of the lab, came to rest under a work table.

Silence.

After a time the technician said shakily, “It had plenty of velocity. Plenty of mass. Plenty of what it needed.”

Haltingly, Tinbane stood up, took a step toward the machine.

“Don’t release another ball,” the technician said warningly.

Tinbane said, “I don’t have to.” He turned, then, sprinted away.

The machine had released the ball itself.

In the outer office, Tinbane sat smoking, seated across from Ted Donovan, the lab chief. The door to the lab had been shut, and every one of the several lab technicians had been bull-horned to safety. Beyond the closed door the lab was silent. Inert, Tinbane thought, and waiting.

He wondered if it was waiting for anyone, any human, any Terran, to come within reach. Or — just him.

The latter thought amused him even less than it had originally; even seated out here he felt himself cringe. A machine built on another world, sent to Terra empty of direction, merely capable of sorting among all its defensive possibilities until at last it stumbled onto the key. Randomness at work, through hundreds, even thousands of games… through person after person, player after player. Until at last it reached critical direction, and the last person to play it, also selected by the process of randomness, became welded to it in a contract of death. In this case, himself. Unfortunately.

Ted Donovan said, “We’ll spear its power source from a distance; that shouldn’t be hard. You go on home, forget about it. When we have its tropic circuit laid out we’ll notify you. Unless of course it’s late at night, in which case —”

“Notify me,” Tinbane said, “whatever time it is. If you will.” He did not have to explain; the lab chief understood.

“Obviously,” Donovan said, “this construct is aimed at the police teams raiding the casinos. How they steered our robots onto it we don’t of course know — yet. We may find *that* circuit, too.” He picked up the already extant lab report, eyed it with hostility. “This was far too cursory, it would now appear. ‘Just another outspacer gambling device.’ The hell it is.” He tossed the report away, disgusted.

“If that’s what they had in mind,” Tinbane said, “they got what they wanted; they got me completely.” At least in terms of hooking him. Of snaring his attention. And his cooperation.

“You’re a gambler; you’ve got the streak. But you didn’t know it. Possibly it wouldn’t have worked otherwise.” Donovan added, “But it is interesting. A pinball machine that fights back. That gets fed up with steel balls rolling over it. I hope they don’t build a skeet-shoot. This is bad enough.”

“Dreamlike,” Tinbane murmured.

“Pardon?”

“Not really real.” But, he thought, it is real. He rose, then, to his feet. “I’ll do what you say; I’ll go on home to my conapt. You have the vidphone number.” He felt tired and afraid.

“You look terrible,” Donovan said, scrutinizing him. “It shouldn’t get you to this extent; this is a relatively benign construct, isn’t it? You have to attack it, to set it in motion. If left alone —”

“I’m leaving it alone,” Tinbane said. “But I feel it’s waiting. It wants me to come back.” He felt it expecting him, anticipating his return. The machine was capable of learning and he had taught it — taught it about himself.

Taught it that he existed. That there was such a person on Terra as Joseph Tinbane.

And that was too much.

When he unlocked the door of his conapt the phone was already ringing. Leadenly, he picked up the receiver. “Hello,” he said.

“Tinbane?” It was Donovan’s voice. “It’s encephalotropic, all right. We found a pattern-print of your brain configuration, and of course we destroyed it. But —” Donovan hesitated. “We also found something else it had constructed since the initial analysis.”

“A transmitter,” Tinbane said hoarsely.

“Afraid so. Half-mile of broadcast, two miles if beamed. And it was cupped to beams, so we have to assume the two-mile transmission. We have absolutely no idea what the receiver consists of, naturally, whether it’s even on the surface or not. Probably is. In an office somewhere. Or a hover-car

such as they use. Anyhow, now you know. So it's decidedly a vengeance weapon; your emotional response was unfortunately correct. When our double-dome experts looked this over they drew the conclusion that you were waited-for, so to speak. It saw you coming. The instrument may never have functioned as an authentic gambling device in the first place; the tolerances which we noted may have been built in, rather than the result of wear. So that's about it."

Tinbane said, "What do you suggest I do?"

" 'Do'?" A pause. "Not much. Stay in your conapt; don't report for work, not for a while."

So if they nail me, Tinbane thought, no one else in the department will get hit at the same time. More advantageous for the rest of you; hardly for me, though. "I think I'll get out of the area," he said aloud. "The structure may be limited in space, confined to S.L.A. or just one part of the city. If you don't veto it." He had a girl friend, Nancy Hackett, in La Jolla; he could go there.

"Suit yourself."

He said, "You can't do anything to help me, though."

"I tell you what," Donovan said. "We'll allocate some funds, a moderate sum, best we can, on which you can function. Until we track down the damn receiver and find out what it's tied to. For us, the main headache is that word of this matter has begun to filter through the department. It's going to be hard getting crack-down teams to tackle future outspacer gambling operations… which of course is specifically what they had in mind. One more thing we can do. We can have the lab build you a brain-shield so you no longer emanate a recognizable template. But you'd have to pay for it out of your own pocket. Possibly it could be debited against your salary, payments divided over several months. If you're interested. Frankly, if you want my personal opinion, I'd advise it."

“All right,” Tinbane said. He felt dull, dead, tired and resigned; all of those at once. And he had the deep and acute intuition that his reaction was rational. “Anything else you suggest?” he asked.

“Stay armed. Even when you’re asleep.”

“What sleep?” he said. “You think I’m going to get any sleep? Maybe I will after that machine is totally destroyed.” But that won’t make any difference, he realized. Not now. Not after it’s dispatched my brainwave pattern to something else, something we know nothing about. God knows what equipment it might turn out to be; outspacers show up with all kinds of convoluted things.

He hung up the phone, walked into his kitchen, and getting down a half-empty fifth of Antique bourbon, fixed himself a whisky sour.

What a mess, he said to himself. Pursued by a pinball machine from another world. He almost — but not quite — had to laugh.

What do you use, he asked himself, to catch an angry pinball machine? One that has your number and is out to get you? Or more specifically, a pinball machine’s nebulous friend…

Something went *tap tap* against the kitchen window.

Reaching into his pocket he brought out his regulation-issue laser pistol; walking along the kitchen wall he approached the window from an unseen side, peered out into the night. Darkness. He could make nothing out. Flashlight? He had one in the glove compartment of his aircar, parked on the roof of the conapt building. Time to get it.

A moment later, flashlight in hand, he raced downstairs, back to his kitchen.

The beam of the flashlight showed, pressed against the outer surface of the window, a buglike entity with projecting elongated pseudopodia. The two feelers had tapped against the glass of the window, evidently exploring in their blind, mechanical way.

The bug-thing had ascended the side of the building; he could perceive the suction-tread by which it clung.

His curiosity, at this point, became greater than his fear. With care he opened the window — no need of having to pay the building repair committee for it — and cautiously took aim with his laser pistol. The bug-thing did not stir; evidently it had stalled in midcycle. Probably its responses, he guessed, were relatively slow, much more so than a comparable organic equivalent. Unless, of course, it was set to detonate; in which case he had no time to ponder.

He fired a narrow-beam into the underside of the bug-thing. Maimed, the bug-thing settled backward, its many little cups releasing their hold. As it fell away, Tinbane caught hold of it, lifted it swiftly into the room, dropped it onto the floor, meantime keeping his pistol pointed at it. But it was finished functionally; it did not stir.

Laying it on the small kitchen table he got a screwdriver from the tool-drawer beside the sink, seated himself, examined the object. He felt, now, that he could take his time; the pressure, momentarily at least, had abated.

It took him forty minutes to get the thing open; none of the holding screws fitted an ordinary screwdriver, and he found himself at last using a common kitchen knife. But finally he had it open before him on the table, its shell divided into two parts: one hollow and empty, the other crammed with components. A bomb? He tinkered with exceeding care, inspecting each assembly bit by bit.

No bomb — at least none which he could identify. Then a murder tool? No blade, no toxins or micro-organisms, no tube capable of expelling a lethal charge, explosive or otherwise. So then what in God’s name did it do?

He recognized the motor which had driven it up the side of the building, then the photoelectric steering turret by which it oriented itself. But that was all. Absolutely all.

From the standpoint of use, it was a fraud.

Or was it? He examined his watch. Now he had spent an entire hour on it; his attention had been diverted from everything else — and who knew what that else might be?

Nervously, he slid stiffly to his feet, collected his laser pistol, and prowled throughout the apartment, listening, wondering, trying to sense something, however small, that was out of its usual order.

It's giving them time, he realized. One entire hour! For whatever it is they're *really* up to.

Time, he thought, for me to leave the apartment. To get to La Jolla and the hell out of here, until this is all over with. His vidphone rang.

When he answered it, Ted Donovan's face clicked grayly into view. "We've got a department aircar monitoring your conapt building," Donovan said. "And it picked up some activity; I thought you'd want to know."

"Okay," he said tensely.

"A vehicle, airborne, landed briefly on your roof parking lot. Not a standard aircar but something larger. Nothing we could recognize. It took right off again at great speed, but I think this is it."

"Did it deposit anything?" he asked.

"Yes. Afraid so."

Tight lipped, he said, “Can you do anything for me at this late point? It would be appreciated very much.”

“What do you suggest? We don’t know what it is; you certainly don’t know either. We’re open to ideas, but I think we’ll have to wait until you know the nature of the — hostile artifact.”

Something bumped against his door, something in the hall.

“I’ll leave the line open,” Tinbane said. “Don’t leave; I think it’s happening now.” He felt panic, at this stage; overt, childish panic. Carrying his laser pistol in a numb, loose grip he made his way step by step to the locked front door of his conapt, halted, then unlocked the door and opened it. Slightly. As little as he could manage.

An enormous, unchecked force pushed the door farther; the knob left his hand. And, soundlessly, the vast steel ball resting against the half-open door rolled forward. He stepped aside — he had to — knowing that this was the adversary; the dummy wall-climbing gadget had deflected his attention from this.

He could not get out. He would not be going to La Jolla now. The great massed sphere totally blocked the way.

Returning to the vidphone he said to Donovan, “I’m encapsulated. Here in my own conapt.” At the outer perimeter, he realized. Equal to the rough terrain of the pinball machine’s shifting landscape. The first ball has been blocked there, has lodged in the doorway. But what about the second? The third?

Each would be closer.

“Can you build something for me?” he asked huskily. “Can the lab start working this late at night?”

“We can try,” Donovan said, “It depends entirely on what you want. What do you have in mind? What do you think would help?”

He hated to ask for it. But he had to. The next one might burst in through a window, or crash onto him from the roof. “I want,” he said, “some form of catapult. Big enough, tough enough, to handle a spherical load with a diameter of between four and a half and five feet. You think you can manage it?” He prayed to God they could.

“Is that what you’re facing?” Donovan said harshly.

“Unless it’s an hallucination,” Tinbane said. “A deliberate, artificially induced terror-projection, designed specifically to demoralize me.”

“The department aircar saw something,” Donovan said. “And it wasn’t an hallucination; it had measurable mass. And —” He hesitated. “It did leave off something big. Its departing mass was considerably diminished. So it’s real, Tinbane.”

“That’s what I thought,” Tinbane said.

“We’ll get the catapult to you as soon as we possibly can,” Donovan said. “Let’s hope there’s an adequate interval between each — attack. And you better figure on five at least.”

Tinbane, nodding, lit a cigarette, or at least tried to. But his hands were shaking too badly to get the lighter into place. He then got out a yellow-lacquered tin of Dean’s Own Snuff, but found himself unable to force open the tight tin; the tin hopped from his fingers and fell to the floor. “Five,” he said, “*per game*.”

“Yes,” Donovan said reluctantly, “there’s that.”

The wall of the living room shuddered.

The next one was coming at him from the adjoining apartment.

Faith of Our Fathers

On the streets of Hanoi he found himself facing a legless peddler who rode a little wooden cart and called shrilly to every passer-by. Chien slowed, listened, but did not stop; business at the Ministry of Cultural Artifacts cropped into his mind and deflected his attention: it was as if he were alone, and none of those on bicycles and scooters and jet-powered motorcycles remained. And likewise it was as if the legless peddler did not exist.

"Comrade," the peddler called, however, and pursued him on his cart; a helium battery operated the drive and sent the cart scuttling expertly after Chien. "I possess a wide spectrum of time-tested herbal remedies complete with testimonials from thousands of loyal users; advise me of your malady and I can assist."

Chien, pausing, said, "Yes, but I have no malady." Except, he thought, for the chronic one of those employed by the Central Committee, that of career opportunism testing constantly the gates of each official position. Including mine.

"I can cure for example radiation sickness," the peddler chanted, still pursuing him. "Or expand, if necessary, the element of sexual prowess. I can reverse carcinomatous progressions, even the dreaded melanomae, what you would call black cancers." Lifting a tray of bottles, small aluminum cans and assorted powders in plastic jars, the peddler sang, "If a rival persists in trying to usurp your gainful bureaucratic position, I can purvey an ointment which, appearing as a dermal balm, is in actuality a desperately effective toxin. And my prices, comrade, are low. And as a special favor to one so distinguished in bearing as yourself I will accept the postwar inflationary paper dollars reputedly of international exchange but in reality damn near no better than bathroom tissue."

“Go to hell,” Chien said, and signaled a passing hover-car taxi; he was already three and one half minutes late for his first appointment of the day, and his various fat-assed superiors at the Ministry would be making quick mental notations — as would, to an even greater degree, his subordinates.

The peddler said quietly, “But, comrade; you *must* buy from me.”

“Why?” Chien demanded. Indignation.

“Because, comrade, I am a war veteran. I fought in the Colossal Final War of National Liberation with the People’s Democratic United Front against the Imperialists; I lost my pedal extremities at the battle of San Francisco.” His tone was triumphant, now, and sly. “*It is the law.* If you refuse to buy wares offered by a veteran you risk a fine and possible jail sentence — and in addition disgrace.”

Wearily, Chien nodded the hovercab on. “Admittedly,” he said. “Okay, I must buy from you.” He glanced summarily over the meager display of herbal remedies, seeking one at random. “That,” he decided, pointing to a paper-wrapped parcel in the rear row.

The peddler laughed. “That, comrade, is a spermatocide, bought by women who for political reasons cannot qualify for The Pill. It would be of shallow use to you, in fact none at all, since you are a gentleman.”

“The law,” Chien said bitingly, “does not require me to purchase anything useful from you; only that I purchase something. I’ll take that.” He reached into his padded coat for his billfold, huge with the postwar inflationary bills in which, four times a week, he as a government servant was paid.

“Tell me your problems,” the peddler said.

Chien stared at him, appalled by the invasion of privacy — and done by someone outside the government.

“All right, comrade,” the peddler said, seeing his expression. “I will not probe; excuse me. But as a doctor — an herbal healer — it is fitting that I know as much as possible.” He pondered, his gaunt features somber. “Do you watch television unusually much?” he asked abruptly.

Taken by surprise, Chien said, “Every evening. Except on Friday, when I go to my club to practice the esoteric imported art from the defeated West of steer-roping.” It was his only indulgence; other than that he had totally devoted himself to Party activities.

The peddler reached, selected a gray paper packet. “Sixty trade dollars,” he stated. “With a full guarantee; if it does not do as promised, return the unused portion for a full and cheery refund.”

“And what,” Chien said cuttingly, “is it guaranteed to do?”

“It will rest eyes fatigued by the countenance of meaningless official monologues,” the peddler said. “A soothing preparation; take it as soon as you find yourself exposed to the usual dry and lengthy sermons which —”

Chien paid the money, accepted the packet, and strode off. Balls, he said to himself. It’s a racket, he decided, the ordinance setting up war vets as a privileged class. They prey off us — we, the younger ones — like raptors.

Forgotten, the gray packet remained deposited in his coat pocket as he entered the imposing Postwar Ministry of Cultural Artifacts building, and his own considerable stately office, to begin his workday.

A portly, middle-aged Caucasian male, wearing a brown Hong Kong silk suit, double-breasted with vest, waited in his office. With the unfamiliar Caucasian stood his own immediate superior, Ssu-Ma Tso-pin. Tso-pin introduced the two of them in Cantonese, a dialect which he used badly.

“Mr. Tung Chien, this is Mr. Darius Pethel. Mr. Pethel will be headmaster at the new ideological and cultural establishment of didactic character soon to open at San Fernando, California.” He added, “Mr. Pethel has had a rich and full lifetime supporting the people’s struggle to unseat imperialist-bloc countries via pedagogic media; therefore this high post.” They shook hands.

“Tea?” Chien asked the two of them; he pressed the switch of his infrared hibachi and in an instant the water in the highly ornamented ceramic pot — of Japanese origin — began to burble. As he seated himself at his desk he saw that trustworthy Miss Hsi had laid out the information poop-sheet (confidential) on Comrade Pethel; he glanced over it; meanwhile pretending to be doing nothing in particular.

“The Absolute Benefactor of the People,” Tso-pin said, “has personally met Mr. Pethel and trusts him. This is rare. The school in San Fernando will appear to teach run-of-the-mill Taoist philosophies but will, of course, in actuality maintain for us a channel of communication to the liberal and intellectual youth segment of western U.S. There are many of them still alive, from San Diego to Sacramento; we estimate at least ten thousand. The school will accept two thousand. Enrollment will be mandatory for those we select. Your relationship to Mr. Pethel’s programming is grave. Ahem; your tea water is boiling.”

“Thank you,” Chien murmured, dropping in the bag of Lipton’s tea.

Tso-pin continued, “Although Mr. Pethel will supervise the setting up of the courses of instruction presented by the school to its student body, all examination papers will, oddly enough, be relayed here to your office for your own expert, careful, ideological study. In other words, Mr. Chien, you will determine who among the two thousand students is reliable, which are truly responding to the programming and who is not.”

“I will now pour my tea,” Chien said, doing so ceremoniously.

“What we have to realize,” Pethel rumbled in Cantonese even worse than that of Tso-pin, “is that, once having lost the global war to us, the American youth has developed a talent for dissembling.” He spoke the last word in English; not understanding it, Chien turned inquiringly to his superior.

“Lying,” Tso-pin explained.

Pethel said, “Mouthing the proper slogans for surface appearance, but on the inside believing them false. Test papers by this group will closely resemble those of genuine —”

“You mean that the test papers of *two thousand* students will be passing through my office?” Chien demanded. He could not believe it. “That’s a full-time job in itself; I don’t have time for anything remotely resembling that.” He was appalled. “To give critical, official approval or denial of the astute variety which you’re envisioning —” He gestured. “Screw that,” he said, in English.

Blinking at the strong, Western vulgarity, Tso-pin said, “You have a staff. Plus you can requisition several more from the pool; the Ministry’s budget, augmented this year, will permit it. And remember: the Absolute Benefactor of the People has hand-picked Mr. Pethel.” His tone, now, had become ominous, but only subtly so. Just enough to penetrate Chien’s hysteria, and to wither it into submission. At least temporarily. To underline his point, Tso-pin walked to the far end of the office; he stood before the full-length 3-D portrait of the Absolute Benefactor, and after an interval his proximity triggered the tape-transport mounted behind the portrait; the face of the Benefactor moved, and from it came a familiar homily, in more than familiar accents. “Fight for peace, my sons,” it intoned gently, firmly.

“Ha,” Chien said, still perturbed, but concealing it. Possibly one of the Ministry’s computers could sort the examination papers; a yes-no-maybe structure could be employed, in conjunction with a pre-analysis of the pattern of ideological correctness — and incorrectness. The matter could be made routine. Probably.

Darius Pethel said, “I have with me certain material which I would like you to scrutinize, Mr. Chien.” He unzipped an unsightly, old-fashioned, plastic briefcase. “Two examination essays,” he said as he passed the documents to Chien. “This will tell us if you’re qualified.” He then glanced at Tso-pin; their gazes met. “I understand,” Pethel said, “that if you are successful in this venture you will be made vice-councilor of the Ministry, and His Greatness the Absolute Benefactor of the People will personally confer Kisterigian’s medal on you.” Both he and Tso-pin smiled in wary unison.

“The Kisterigian medal,” Chien echoed; he accepted the examination papers, glanced over them in a show of leisurely indifference. But within him his heart vibrated in ill-concealed tension. “Why these two? By that I mean, what am I looking for, sir?”

“One of them,” Pethel said, “is the work of a dedicated progressive, a loyal Party member of thoroughly researched conviction. The other is by a young *stilyagi* whom we suspect of holding petit-bourgeois imperialist degenerate crypto-ideas. It is up to you, sir, to determine which is which.”

Thanks a lot, Chien thought. But, nodding, he read the title of the top paper.

DOCTRINES OF THE ABSOLUTE BENEFACTOR

ANTICIPATED IN THE POETRY OF BAHA AD-DIN ZUHAYR

OF THIRTEENTH-CENTURY ARABIA.

Glancing down the initial pages of the essay, Chien saw a quatrain familiar to him; it was called “Death,” and he had known it most of his adult, educated life.

Once he will miss, twice he will miss,

He only chooses one of many hours;

For him nor deep nor hill there is,

But all’s one level plain he hunts for flowers.

“Powerful,” Chien said. “This poem.”

“He makes use of the poem,” Pethel said, observing Chien’s lips moving as he reread the quatrain, “to indicate the age-old wisdom, displayed by the Absolute Benefactor in our current lives, that no individual is safe; everyone is mortal, and only the supra-personal, historically essential cause survives. As it should be. Would you agree with him? With this student, I mean? Or —” Pethel paused. “Is he in fact perhaps satirizing the Absolute Benefactor’s promulgations?”

Cagily, Chien said, “Give me a chance to inspect the other paper.”

“You need no further information; decide.”

Haltingly, Chien said, “I — I had never thought of this poem that way.” He felt irritable. “Anyhow, it isn’t by Baha ad-Din Zuhayr; it’s part of the *Thousand and One Nights* anthology. It is, however, thirteenth century; I admit that.” He quickly read over the text of the paper accompanying the poem. It appeared to be a routine, uninspired rehash of Party cliches, all of them familiar to him from birth. The blind, imperialist monster who moved down and snuffed out (mixed metaphor) human aspiration, the calculations of the still extant anti-Party group in eastern United States… He felt dully bored, and as uninspired as the student’s paper. We must persevere, the paper declared. Wipe out the Pentagon remnants in the Catskills, subdue Tennessee and most especially the pocket of die-hard reaction in the red hills of Oklahoma. He sighed.

“I think,” Tso-pin said, “we should allow Mr. Chien the opportunity of observing this difficult matter at his leisure.” To Chien he said, “You have permission to take them home to your condominium, this evening, and adjudge them on your own time.” He bowed, half mockingly, half solicitously. In any case, insult or not, he had gotten Chien off the hook, and for that Chien was grateful.

“You are most kind,” he murmured, “to allow me to perform this new and highly stimulating labor on my own time. Mikoyan, were he alive today, would approve.” You bastard, he said to himself. Meaning both his superior and the Caucasian Pethel. Handing me a hot potato like this, and on my own time. Obviously the CP U.S.A. is in trouble; its indoctrination academies aren’t managing to do their job with the notoriously mulish, eccentric Yank youths. And you’ve passed that hot potato on and on until it reaches me.

Thanks for nothing, he though acidly.

That evening in his small but well-appointed condominium apartment he read over the other of the two examination papers, this one by a Marion Culper, and discovered that it, too, dealt with poetry. Obviously this was speciously a poetry class, and he felt ill. It had always run against his grain, the use of poetry — of any art — for social purposes. Anyhow, comfortable in his special spine-straightening, simulated-leather easy chair, he lit a Cuesta Rey Number One English Market immense corona cigar and began to read.

The writer of the paper, Miss Culper, had selected as her text a portion of a poem of John Dryden, the seventeenth-century English poet, final lines from the well-known “A Song for St. Cecilia’s Day.”

… So when the last and dreadful hour rumbling pageant shall devour,

The trumpet shall be heard on high,

The dead shall live, the living die,

And Music shall untune the sky.

Well, that’s a hell of a thing, Chien thought to himself bitingly. Dryden, we’re supposed to believe, anticipated the fall of capitalism? That’s what he meant by the “crumbling pageant”? Christ. He leaned over to take hold of

his cigar and found that it had gone out. Groping in his pockets for his Japanese-made lighter, he half rose to his feet.

Tweeeeeee! the TV set at the far end of the living room said.

Aha, Chien thought. We're about to be addressed by the Leader. By the Absolute Benefactor of the People, up there in Peking, where he's lived for ninety years now; or is it one hundred? Or, as we sometimes like to think of him, the Ass —

"May the ten thousand blossoms of abject self-assumed poverty flower in your spiritual courtyard," the TV announcer said. With a groan, Chien rose to his feet, bowed the mandatory bow of response; each TV set came equipped with monitoring devices to narrate to the Secpol, the Security Police, whether its owner was bowing and/or watching.

On the screen a clearly defined visage manifested itself, the wide, unlined, healthy features of the one-hundred-and-twenty-year-old leader of CP East, ruler of many — far too many, Chien reflected. Blah to you, he thought, and reseated himself in his simulated-leather easy chair, now facing the TV screen.

"My thoughts," the Absolute Benefactor said in his rich and slow tones, "are on you, my children. And especially on Mr. Tung Chien of Hanoi, who faces a difficult task ahead, a task to enrich the people of Democratic East, plus the American West Coast. We must think in unison about this noble, dedicated man and the chore which he faces, and I have chosen to take several moments of my time to honor him and encourage him. Are you listening, Mr. Chien?"

"Yes, Your Greatness," Chien said, and pondered to himself the odds against the Party Leader singling *him* out this particular evening. The odds caused him to feel uncomradely cynicism; it was unconvincing. Probably this transmission was being beamed into his apartment building alone — or at least to this city. It might also be a lip-synch job, done at Hanoi TV, Incorporated. In any case he was required to listen and watch — and absorb. He did so, from a lifetime of practice. Outwardly he appeared to be

rigidly attentive. Inwardly he was still mulling over the two test papers, wondering which was which; where did devout Party enthusiasm end and sardonic lampoonery begin? Hard to say… which of course explained why they had dumped the task in his lap.

Again he groped in his pockets for his lighter — and found the small gray envelope which the war-veteran peddler had sold him. Gawd, he thought, remembering what it had cost. Money down the drain and what did this herbal remedy do? Nothing. He turned the packet over and saw, on the back, small printed words. Well, he thought, and began to unfold the packet with care. The words had snared him — as of course they were meant to do.

Failing as a Party member and human?

Afraid of becoming obsolete and discarded on the ash heap of history by…

He read rapidly through the text, ignoring its claims, seeking to find out what he had purchased.

Meanwhile the Absolute Benefactor droned on.

Snuff. The package contained snuff. Countless tiny black grains, like gunpowder, which sent up an interesting aromatic to tickle his nose. The title of the particular blend was Princes Special, he discovered. And very pleasing, he decided. At one time he had taken snuff — smoking tobacco for a time having been illegal for reasons of health — back during his student days at Peking U; it had been the fad, especially the amatory mixes prepared in Chungking, made from God knew what. Was this that? Almost any aromatic could be added to snuff, from essence of organe to pulverized baby-crab… or so some seemed, especially an English mixture called High Dry Toast which had in itself more or less put an end to his yearning for nasal, inhaled tobacco. On the TV screen the Absolute Benefactor rumbled monotonously on as Chien sniffed cautiously at the powder, read the claims — it cured everything from being late to work to falling in love with a woman of dubious political background. Interesting. But typical of claims —

His doorbell rang.

Rising, he walked to the door, opened it with full knowledge of what he would find. There, sure enough, stood Mou Kuei, the Building Warden, small and hard-eyed and alert to his task; he had his arm band and metal helmet on, showing that he meant business. “Mr. Chien, comrade Party worker. I received a call from the television authority. You are failing to watch your television screen and are instead fiddling with a packet of doubtful content.” He produced a clipboard and ballpoint pen. “Two red marks, and hithertonow you are summarily ordered to repose yourself in a comfortable, stress-free posture before your screen and give the Leader your unexcelled attention. His words, this evening, are directed particularly to you, sir; to you.”

“I doubt that,” Chien heard himself say.

Blinking, Kuei said, “What do you mean?”

“The Leader rules eight billion comrades. He isn’t going to single me out.” He felt wrathful; the punctuality of the warden’s reprimand irked him.

Kuei said, “But I distinctly heard with my own ears. You were mentioned.”

Going over to the TV set, Chien turned the volume up. “But now he’s talking about failures in People’s India; that’s of no relevance to me.”

“Whatever the Leader expostulates is relevant.” Mou Kuei scratched a mark on his clipboard sheet, bowed formally, turned away. “My call to come up here to confront you with your slackness originated at Central. Obviously they regard your attention as important; I must order you to set in motion your automatic transmission recording circuit and replay the earlier portions of the Leader’s speech.”

Chien farted. And shut the door.

Back to the TV set, he said to himself. Where our leisure hours are spent. And there lay the two student examination papers; he had that weighing him down, too. And all on my own time, he thought savagely. The hell with them. Up theirs. He strode to the TV set, started to shut it off; at once a red warning light winked on, informing that he did not have permission to shut off the set — could not in fact end its tirade and image even if he unplugged it. Mandatory speeches, he thought, will kill us all, bury us; if I could be free of the noise of speeches, free of the din of the Party baying as it hounds mankind…

There was no known ordinance, however, preventing him from taking snuff while he watched the Leader. So, opening the small gray packet, he shook out a mound of the black granules onto the back of his left hand. He then, professionally, raised his hand to his nostrils and deeply inhaled, drawing the snuff well up into his sinus cavities. Imagine the old superstition, he thought to himself. That the sinus cavities are connected to the brain, and hence an inhalation of snuff directly affects the cerebral cortex. He smiled, seated himself once more, fixed his gaze on the TV screen and the gesticulating individual known so utterly to them all.

The face dwindled away, disappeared. The sound ceased. He faced an emptiness, a vacuum. The screen, white and blank, confronted him and from the speaker a faint hiss sounded.

The frigging snuff, he said to himself. And inhaled greedily at the remainder of the powder on his hand, drawing it up avidly into his nose, his sinuses, and, or so it felt, into his brain; he plunged into the snuff, absorbing it elatedly.

The screen remained blank and then, by degrees, an image once more formed and established itself. It was not the Leader. Not the Absolute Benefactor of the People, in point of fact not a human figure at all.

He faced a dead mechanical construct, made of solid state circuits, of swiveling pseudopodia, lenses and a squawk-box. And the box began, in a

droning din, to harangue him.

Staring fixedly, he thought, *What is this?* Reality? Hallucination, he thought. The peddler came across some of the psychedelic drugs used during the War of Liberation — he's selling the stuff and I've taken some, taken a whole lot!

Making his way unsteadily to the vidphone, he dialed the Secpol station nearest his building. "I wish to report a pusher of hallucinogenic drugs," he said into the receiver.

"Your name, sir, and conapt location?" Efficient, brisk and impersonal bureaucrat of the police.

He gave them the information, then haltingly made it back to his simulated-leather easy chair, once again to witness the apparition on the TV screen. This is lethal, he said to himself. It must be some preparation developed in Washington, D.C., or London — stronger and stranger than the LSD-25 which they dumped so effectively into our reservoirs. And I thought it was going to relieve me of the burden of the Leader's speeches… this is far worse, this electronic, sputtering, swiveling, metal and plastic monstrosity yammering away — this is terrifying.

To have to face *this* the remainder of my life —

It took ten minutes for the Secpol two-man team to come rapping at his door. And by then, in a deteriorating set of stages, the familiar image of the Leader had seeped back into focus on the screen, had supplanted the horrible artificial construct which waved its podia and squalled on and on. He let the two cops in shakily, led them to the table on which he had left the remains of the snuff in its packet.

"Psychedelic toxin," he said thickly. "Of short duration. Absorbed into the bloodstream directly, through nasal capillaries. I'll give you details as to where I got it, from whom, all that." He took a deep shaky breath; the presence of the police was comforting.

Ballpoint pens ready, the two officers waited. And all the time, in the background, the Leader rattled out his endless speech. As he had done a thousand evenings before in the life of Tung Chien. But, he thought, it'll never be the same again, at least not for me. Not after inhaling that near-toxic snuff.

He wondered, Is that what they intended?

It seemed odd to him, thinking of a *they.* Peculiar — but somehow correct. For an instant he hesitated, to giving out the details, not telling the police enough to find the man. A peddler, he started to say. I don't know where; can't remember. But he did; he remembered the exact street intersection. So, with unexplainable reluctance, he told them.

"Thank you, comrade Chien." The boss of the team of police carefully gathered up the remaining snuff — most of it remained — and placed it in his uniform — smart, sharp uniform — pocket. "We'll have it analyzed at the first available moment," the cop said, "and inform you immediately in case counter-medical measures are indicated for you. Some of the old wartime psychedelics were eventually fatal, as you have no doubt read."

"I've read," he agreed. That had been specifically what he had been thinking.

"Good luck and thanks for notifying us," both cops said, and departed. The affair, for all their efficiency, did not seem to shake them; obviously such a complaint was routine.

The lab report came swiftly — surprisingly so, in view of the vast state bureaucracy. It reached him by vidphone before the Leader had finished his TV speech.

"It's not a hallucinogen," the Secpol lab technician informed him.

"No?" he said, puzzled and, strangely, not relieved. Not at all.

“On the contrary. It’s a phenothiazine, which as you doubtless know is anti-hallucinogenic. A strong dose per gram of admixture, but harmless. Might lower your blood pressure or make you sleepy. Probably stolen from a wartime cache of medical supplies. Left by the retreating barbarians. I wouldn’t worry.”

Pondering, Chien hung up the vidphone in slow motion. And then walked to the window of his conapt — the window with the fine view of other Hanoi high-rise conapts — to think.

The doorbell rang. Feeling as if he were in a trance, he crossed the carpeted living room to answer it.

The girl standing there, in a tan raincoat with a babushka over her dark, shiny, and very long hair, said in a timid little voice, “Um, Comrade Chien? Tung Chien? Of the Ministry of — “

He let her in, reflexively, and shut the door after her. “You’ve been monitoring my vidphone,” he told her; it was a shot in darkness, but something in him, an unvoiced certitude, told him that she had.

“Did — they take the rest of the snuff?” She glanced about. “Oh, I hope not; it’s so hard to get these days,”

“Snuff,” he said, “is easy to get. Phenothiazine isn’t. Is that what you mean?”

The girl raised her head, studied him with large, moon-darkened eyes. “Yes. Mr. Chien —” She hesitated, obviously as uncertain as the Secpol cops had been assured. “Tell me what you saw; it’s of great importance for us to be certain.”

“I had a choice?” he said acutely.

“Y-yes, very much so. That’s what confuses us; that’s what is not as we planned. We don’t understand it; it fits nobody’s theory.” Her eyes even darker and deeper, she said, “Was it the aquatic horror shape? The thing with slime and teeth, the extraterrestrial life form? Please tell me; we have to know.” She breathed irregularly, with effort, the tan raincoat rising and falling; he found himself watching its rhythm.

“A machine,” he said.

“Oh!” She ducked her head, nodding vigorously. “Yes, I understand; a mechanical organism in no way resembling a human. Not a simulacrum, or something constructed to resemble a man.”

He said, “This did not look like a man.” He added to himself, And it failed — did not try — to talk like a man.

“You understand that it was not a hallucination.”

“I’ve been officially told that what I took was a phenothiazine. That’s all I know.” He said as little as possible; he did not want to talk but to hear. Hear what the girl had to say.

“Well, Mr. Chien —” She took a deep, unstable breath. “If it was not a hallucination, then what was it? What does that leave? What is called ‘extra-consciousness’ — could that be it?”

He did not answer; turning his back, he leisurely picked up the two student test papers, glanced over them, ignoring her. Waiting for her next attempt.

At his shoulder, she appeared, smelling of spring rain, smelling of sweetness and agitation, beautiful in the way she smelled, and looked, and, he thought, speaks. So different from the harsh plateau speech patterns we hear on the TV — have heard since I was a baby.

“Some of them,” she said huskily, “who take the stelazine — it was stelazine you got, Mr. Chien — see one apparition, some another. But distinct categories have emerged; there is not an infinite variety. Some see what you saw; we call it the Clanker. Some the aquatic horror; that’s the Gulper. And then there’s the Bird, and the Climbing Tube, and —” She broke off. “But other reactions tell you very little. Tell *us* very little.” She hesitated, then plunged on. “Now that this has happened to you, Mr. Chien, we would like you to join our gathering. Join your particular group, those who see what you see. Group Red. We want to know what it *really* is, and —” She gestured with tapered, wax smooth fingers. “It can’t be *all* those manifestations.” Her tone was poignant, naively so. He felt his caution relax — a trifle.

He said, “What do you see? You in particular?”

“I’m a part of Group Yellow. I see — a storm. A whining, vicious whirlwind. That roots everything up, crushes condominium apartments built to last a century.” She smiled wanly. “The Crusher. Twelve groups in all, Mr. Chien. Twelve absolutely different experiments, all from the same phenothiazines, all of the Leader as he speaks over TV. As *it* speaks, rather.” She smiled up at him, lashes long — probably protracted artificially — and gaze engaging, even trusting. As if she thought he knew something or could do something.

“I should make a citizen’s arrest of you,” he said presently.

“There is no law, not about this. We studied Soviet judicial writings before we — found people to distribute the stelazine. We don’t have much of it; we have to be very careful whom we give it to. It seemed to us that you constituted a likely choice… a well-known, postwar, dedicated young career man on his way up.” From his fingers she took the examination papers. “They’re having you pol-read?” she asked.

” ‘Pol-read’?” He did not know the term.

“Study something said or written to see if it fits the Party’s current world view. You in the hierarchy merely call it ‘read,’ don’t you?” Again she smiled. “When you rise one step higher, up with Mr. Tso-pin, you will know that expression.” She added somberly, “And with Mr. Pethel. He’s very far up. Mr. Chien, there is no ideological school in San Fernando; these are forged exam papers, designed to read back to them a thorough analysis of *your* political ideology. And have you been able to distinguish which paper is orthodox and which is heretical?” Her voice was pixielike, taunting with amused malice. “Choose the wrong one and your budding career stops dead, cold, in its tracks. Choose the proper one —”

“Do you know which is which?” he demanded.

“Yes.” She nodded soberly. “We have listening devices in Mr. Tso-pin’s inner offices; we monitored his conversation with Mr. Pethel — who is not Mr. Pethel but the Higher Secpol Inspector Judd Craine. You have probably heard mention of him; he acted as chief assistant to Judge Vorlawsky at the ‘98 war-crimes trial in Zurich.”

With difficulty he said, “I — see.” Well, that explained that.

The girl said, “My name is Tanya Lee.”

He said nothing; he merely nodded, too stunned for any cerebration.

“Technically, I am a minor clerk,” Miss Lee said, “at your Ministry. You have never run into me, however, that I can at least recall. We try to hold posts wherever we can. As far up as possible. My own boss —”

“Should you be telling me this?” he gestured at the TV set, which remained on. “Aren’t they picking this up?”

Tanya Lee said, “We introduced a noise factor in the reception of both vid and aud material from this apartment building; it will take them almost an hour to locate the sheathing. So we have” — she examined the tiny

wristwatch on her slender wrist — “fifteen more minutes. And still be safe.”

“Tell me,” he said, “which paper is orthodox.”

“Is that what you care about? Really?”

“What,” he said, “should I care about?”

“Don’t you see, Mr. Chien? You’ve learned something. The Leader is not the Leader; he is something else, but we can’t tell what. Not yet. Mr. Chien, when all due respect, have you ever had your drinking water analyzed? I know it sounds paranoiac, but have you?”

“No,” he said. “Of course not.” Knowing what she was going to say.

Miss Lee said briskly, “Our tests show that it’s saturated with hallucinogens. It is, has been, will continue to be. Not the ones used during the war; not the disorientating ones, but a synthetic quasi-ergot derivative called Datrox-3. You drink it here in the building from the time you get up; you drink it in restaurants and other apartments that you visit. You drink it at the Ministry; it’s all piped from a central, common source.” Her tone was bleak and ferocious. “We solved that problem; we knew, as soon as we discovered it, that any good phenothiazine would counter it. What we did not know, of course, was this — a *variety* of authentic experiences; that makes no sense, rationally. It’s the hallucination which should differ from person to person, and the reality experience which should be ubiquitous — it’s all turned around. We can’t even construct an ad hoc theory which accounts for that, and God knows we’ve tried. Twelve mutually exclusive hallucinations — that would be easily understood. But not one hallucination and twelve realities.” She ceased talking then, and studied the two test papers, her forehead wrinkling. “The one with the Arabic poem is orthodox,” she stated. “If you tell them that they’ll trust you and give you a higher post. You’ll be another notch up in the hierarchy of Party officialdom.” Smiling — her teeth were perfect and lovely — she finished,

“Look what you received back for your investment this morning. Your career is underwritten for a time. And by us.”

He said, “I don’t believe you.” Instinctively, his caution operated within him, always, the caution of a lifetime lived among the hatchet men of the Hanoi branch of the CP East. They knew an infinitude of ways by which to ax a rival out of contention — some of which he himself had employed; some of which he had seen done to himself and to others. This could be a novel way, one unfamiliar to him. It could always be.

“Tonight,” Miss Lee said, “in the speech the Leader singled you out. Didn’t this strike you as strange? You, of all people? A minor officeholder in a meager ministry —”

“Admitted,” he said. “It struck me that way; yes.”

“That was legitimate. His Greatness is grooming an elite cadre of younger men, postwar men, he hopes will infuse new life into the hidebound, moribund hierarchy of old fogies and Party hacks. His Greatness singled you out for the same reason that we singled you out; if pursued properly, your career could lead you all the way to the top. At least for a time… as we know. That’s how it goes.”

He thought: So virtually everyone has faith in me. Except myself; and certainly not after this, the experience with the anti-hallucinatory snuff. It had shaken years of confidence, and no doubt rightly so. However, he was beginning to regain his poise; he felt it seeping back, a little at first, then with a rush.

Going to the vidphone, he lifted the receiver and began, for the second time that night, to dial the number of the Hanoi Security Police.

“Turning me in,” Miss Lee said, “would be the second most regressive decision you could make. I’ll tell them that you brought me here to bribe me; you thought, because of my job at the Ministry, I would know which examination paper to select.”

He said, “And what would be my first most regressive decision?”

“Not taking a further dose of phenothiazine,” Miss Lee said evenly.

Hanging up the phone, Tung Chien thought to himself, I don’t understand what’s happening to me. Two forces, the Party and His Greatness on one hand — this girl with her alleged group on the other. One wants me to rise as far as possible in the Party hierarchy; the other — *What did Tanya Lee want?* Underneath the words, inside the membrane of an almost trivial contempt for the Party, the Leader, the ethical standards of the People’s Democratic United Front — what was she after in regard to him?

He said curiously, “Are you anti-Party?”

“No.”

“But — ” He gestured. “That’s all there is: Party and anti-Party. You must be Party, then.” Bewildered, he stared at her; with composure she returned the stare. “You have an organization,” he said, “and you meet. What do you intend to destroy? The regular function of government? Are you like the treasonable college students of the United States during the Vietnam War who stopped troop trains, demonstrated —”

Wearily Miss Lee said, “It wasn’t like that. But forget it; that’s not the issue. What we want to know is this: who or what is leading us? We must penetrate far enough to enlist someone, some rising young Party theoretician, who could conceivably be invited to a tête-à-tête with the Leader — you see?” Her voice lifted; she consulted her watch, obviously anxious to get away: the fifteen minutes were almost up. “Very few persons actually see the Leader, as you know. I mean really see him.”

“Seclusion,” he said. “Due to his advanced age.”

“We have hope,” Miss Lee said, “that if you pass the phony test which they have arranged for you — and with my help you have — you will be invited to one of the stag parties which the Leader has from time to time, which of course the papers don’t report. Now do you see?” Her voice rose shrilly, in a frenzy of despair. “Then we would know; if you could go in there under the influence of the anti-hallucinogenic drug, could see him face to face as he actually is —”

Thinking aloud, he said, “And end my career of public service. If not my life.”

“You owe us something,” Tanya Lee snapped, her cheeks white. “If I hadn’t told you which exam paper to choose you would have picked the wrong one and your dedicated public-service career would be over anyhow; you would have failed — failed at a test you didn’t even realize you were taking!”

He said mildly, “I had a fifty-fifty chance.”

“No.” She shook her head fiercely. “The heretical one is faked up with a lot of Party jargon; they deliberately constructed the two texts to trap you. They *wanted* you to fail!”

Once more he examined the two papers, feeling confused. Was she right? Possibly. Probably. It rang true, knowing the Party functionaries as he did, and Tso-pin, his superior, in particular. He felt weary then. Defeated. After a time he said to the girl, “What you’re trying to get out of me is a quid pro quo. You did something for me — you got, or claim you got, the answer to this Party inquiry. But you’ve already done your part. What’s to keep me from tossing you out of here on your head? I don’t have to do a goddamn thing.” He heard his voice, toneless, sounding the poverty of empathic emotionality so usual in Party circles.

Miss Lee said, “There will be other tests, as you continue to ascend. And we will monitor for you with them too.” She was calm, at ease; obviously she had foreseen his reaction.

“How long do I have to think it over?” he said.

“I’m leaving now. We’re in no rush; you’re not about to receive an invitation to the Leader’s Yangtze River villa in the next week or even month.” Going to the door, opening it, she paused. “As you’re given covert rating tests we’ll be in contact, supplying the answers — so you’ll see one or more of us on those occasions. Probably it won’t be me; it’ll be that disabled war veteran who’ll sell you the correct response sheets as you leave the Ministry building.” She smiled a brief, snuffed-out-candle smile. “But one of these days, no doubt unexpectedly, you’ll get an ornate, official, very formal invitation to the villa, and when you go you’ll be heavily sedated with stelazine… possibly our last dose of our dwindling supply. Good night.” The door shut after her; she had gone.

My God, he thought. They can blackmail me. For what I’ve done. And she didn’t even bother to mention it; in view of what they’re involved with it was not worth mentioning.

But blackmail for what? He had already told the Secpol squad that he had been given a drug which had proved to be a phenothiazine. *Then they know*, he realized. They’ll watch me; they’re alert. Technically, I haven’t broken a law, but — they’ll be watching, all right.

However, they always watched anyhow. He relaxed slightly, thinking that. He had, over the years, become virtually accustomed to it, as had everyone.

I will see the Absolute Benefactor of the People as he is, he said to himself. Which possibly no one else had done. What will it be? Which of the subclasses of non-hallucination? Classes which I do not even know about… a view which may totally overthrow me. How am I going to be able to get through the evening, to keep my poise, if it’s like the shape I saw on the TV screen? The Crusher, the Clanker, the Bird, the Climbing Tube, the Gulper — or worse.

He wondered what some of the other views consisted of… and then gave up that line of speculation; it was unprofitable. And too anxiety-inducing.

The next morning Mr. Tso-pin and Mr. Darius Pethel met him in his office, both of them calm but expectant. Wordlessly, he handed them one of the two "exam papers." The orthodox one, with its short and heart-smothering Arabian poem.

"This one," Chien said tightly, "is the product of a dedicated Party member or candidate for membership. The other —" He slapped the remaining sheets. "Reactionary garbage." He felt anger. "In spite of a superficial —"

"All right, Mr. Chien," Pethel said, nodding. "We don't have to explore each and every ramification; your analysis is correct. You heard the mention regarding you in the Leader's speech last night on TV?"

"I certainly did," Chien said.

"So you have undoubtedly inferred," Pethel said, "that there is a good deal involved in what we are attempting, here. The leader has his eye on you; that's clear. As a matter of fact, he has communicated to myself regarding you." He opened his bulging briefcase and rummaged. "Lost the goddamn thing. Anyhow —" He glanced at Tso-pin, who nodded slightly. "His Greatness would like to have you appear for dinner at the Yangtze River Ranch next Thursday night. Mrs. Fletcher in particular appreciates —"

Chien said, " 'Mrs. Fletcher'? Who is 'Mrs. Fletcher'?"

After a pause Tso-pin said dryly, "The Absolute Benefactor's wife. His name — which you of course had never heard — is Thomas Fletcher."

“He’s a Caucasian,” Pethel explained. “Originally from the New Zealand Communist Party; he participated in the difficult takeover there. This news is not in the strict sense secret, but on the other hand it hasn’t been noised about.” He hesitated, toying with his watch chain. “Probably it would be better if you forgot about that. Of course, as soon as you meet him, see him face to face, you’ll realize that, realize that he’s a Cauc. As I am. As many of us are.”

“Race,” Tso-pin pointed out, “has nothing to do with loyalty to the leader and the Party. As witness Mr. Pethel, here.”

But His Greatness, Chien thought, jolted. He did not appear, on the TV screen, to be Occidental. “On TV —” he began.

“The image,” Tso-pin interrupted, “is subjected to a variegated assortment of skillful refinements. For ideological purposes. Most persons holding higher offices are aware of this.” He eyed Chien with hard criticism.

So everyone agrees, Chien thought. What we see every night is not real. The question is, How unreal? Partially? Or — completely?

“I will be prepared,” he said tautly. And he thought, There has been a slip-up. They weren’t prepared for me — the people that Tanya Lee represents — to gain entry so soon. Where’s the anti-hallucinogen? Can they get it to me or not? Probably not on such short notice.

He felt, strangely, relief. He would be going into the presence of His Greatness in a position to see him as a human being, see him as he — and everybody else — saw him on TV. It would be a most stimulating and cheerful dinner party, with some of the most influential Party members in Asia. I think we can do without the phenothiazine, he said to himself. And his sense of relief grew.

“Here it is, finally,” Pethel said suddenly, producing a white envelope from his briefcase. “Your card of admission. You will be flown by Sino-rocket to the Leader’s villa Thursday morning; there the protocol officer will brief you on your expected behavior. It will be formal dress, white tie and tails, but the atmosphere will be cordial. There are always a great number of toasts.” He added, “I have attended two such stag get-togethers. Mr. Tso-pin” — he smiled creakily — “has not been honored in such a fashion. But, as they say, all things come to him who waits. Ben Franklin said that.”

Tso-pin said, “It has come for Mr. Chien rather prematurely, I would say.” He shrugged philosophically. “But my opinion has never at any time been asked.”

“One thing,” Pethel said to Chien. “It is possible that when you see His Greatness in person you will be in some regards disappointed. Be alert that you do not let this make itself apparent, if you should so feel. We have, always, tended — been trained — to regard him as more than a man. But at table he is” — he gestured — “a forked radish. In certain respects like ourselves. He may for instance indulge in moderately human oral-aggressive and -passive activity; he possibly may tell an off-color joke or drink too much… To be candid, no one ever knows in advance how these things will work out, but they do generally hold forth until late the following morning. So it would be wise to accept the dosage of amphetamines which the protocol officer will offer you.”

“Oh?” Chien said. This was news to him, and interesting.

“For stamina. And to balance the liquor. His greatness has amazing staying power; he often is still on his feet and raring to go after everyone else has collapsed.”

“A remarkable man,” Tso-pin chimed in. “I think his — indulgences only show that he is a fine fellow. And fully in the round; he is like the ideal Renaissance man; as, for example, Lorenzo de’ Medici.”

“That does come to mind,” Pethel said; he studied Chien with such intensity that some of last night’s chill returned. Am I being led into one trap after another? Chien wondered. That girl — was she in fact an agent of the Secpol probing me, trying to ferret out a disloyal, anti-Party streak in me?

I think, he decided, I will make sure that the legless peddler of herbal remedies does not snare me when I leave work; I’ll take a totally different route back to my conapt.

He was successful. That day he avoided the peddler, and the same the next, and so on until Thursday.

On Thursday morning the peddler scooted from beneath a parked truck and blocked his way, confronting him.

“My medication?” the peddler demanded. “It helped? I know it did; the formula goes back to the Sung Dynasty — I can tell it did. Right?”

Chien said, “Let me go.”

“Would you be kind enough to answer?” The tone was not the expected, customary whining of a street peddler operating in a marginal fashion, and that tone came across to Chien; he heard loud and clear… as the Imperialist puppet troops of long ago phrased.

“I know what you gave me,” Chien said. “And I don’t want any more. If I change my mind I can pick it up at a pharmacy. Thanks.” He started on, but the cart, with the legless occupant, pursued him.

“Miss Lee was talking to me,” the peddler said loudly.

“Hmmm,” Chien said, and automatically increased his pace; he spotted a hovercab and began signaling for it.

“It’s tonight you’re going to the stag dinner at the Yangtze River villa,” the peddler said, panting for breath in his effort to keep up. “Take the medication — now!” He held out a flat packet, imploringly. “Please, Party Member Chien; for your own sake, for all of us. So we can tell what it is we’re up against. Good Lord, it may be nonTerran; that’s our most basic fear. Don’t you understand, Chien? What’s your goddamn career compared with that? If we can’t find out —”

The cab bumped to a halt on the pavement; its doors slid open. Chien started to board it.

The packet sailed past him, landed on the entrance sill of the cab, then slid onto the floor, damp from earlier rain.

“Please,” the peddler said. “And it won’t cost you anything; today it’s free. Just take it, use it before the stag dinner. And don’t use the amphetamines; they’re a thalamic stimulant, contraindicated whenever an adrenal suppressant such as a phenothiazine is —”

The door of the cab closed after Chien. He seated himself.

“Where to, comrade?” the robot drive-mechanism inquired.

He gave the ident tag number of his conapt.

“That halfwit of a peddler managed to infiltrate his seedy wares into my clean interior,” the cab said. “Notice; it reposes by your foot.”

He saw the packet — no more than an ordinary-looking envelope. I guess, he thought, this is how drugs come to you; all of a sudden they’re there. For a moment he sat, and then he picked it up.

As before, there was a written enclosure above and beyond the medication, but this time, he saw, it was handwritten. A feminine script — from Miss Lee:

We were surprised at the suddenness. But thank heaven we were ready. Where were you Tuesday and Wednesday? Anyhow, here it is, and good luck. I will approach you later in the week; I don’t want you to try to find me.

He ignited the note, burned it up in the cab’s disposal ashtray.

And kept the dark granules.

All this time, he thought. Hallucinogens in our water supply. Year after year. Decades. And not in wartime but in peacetime. And not to the enemy camp but here in our own. The evil bastards, he said to himself. Maybe I ought to take this; maybe I ought to find out what he or it is and let Tanya’s group know.

I will, he decided. And — he was curious.

A bad emotion, he knew. Curiosity was, especially in Party activities, often a terminal state careerwise.

A state which, at the moment, gripped him thoroughly. He wondered if it would last through the evening, if, when it came right down to it, he would actually take the inhalant.

Time would tell. Tell that and everything else. We are blooming flowers, he thought, on the plain, which he picks. As the Arabic poem had put it. He tried to remember the rest of the poem but could not.

That probably was just as well.

The villa protocol officer, a Japanese named Kimo Okubara, tall and husky, obviously a quondam wrestler, surveyed him with innate hostility, even after he presented his engraved invitation and had successfully managed to prove his identity.

“Surprise you bother to come,” Okubara muttered. “Why not stay home and watch on TV? Nobody miss you. We got along fine without you up to right now.

Chien said tightly, “I’ve already watched on TV.” And anyhow the stag dinners were rarely televised; they were too bawdy.

Okubara’s crew double-checked him for weapons, including the possibility of an anal suppository, and then gave him his clothes back. They did not find the phenothiazine, however. Because he had already taken it. The effects of such a drug, he knew, lasted approximately four hours; that would be more than enough. And, as Tanya had said, it was a major dose; he felt sluggish and inept and dizzy, and his tongue moved in spasms of pseudo-Parkinsonism — an unpleasant side effect which he had failed to anticipate.

A girl, nude from the waist up, with long coppery hair down her shoulders and back, walked by. Interesting.

Coming the other way, a girl nude from the bottom up made her appearance. Interesting, too. Both girls looked vacant and bored, and totally self-possessed.

“You go in like that too,” Okubara informed Chien.

Startled, Chien said, “I understood white tie and tails.”

“Joke,” Okubara said. “At your expense. Only girls wear nude; you even get so you enjoy, unless you homosexual.”

Well, Chien thought, I guess I had better like it. He wandered on with the other guests — they, like him, wore white tie and tails, or, if women, floor-length gowns — and felt ill at ease, despite the tranquilizing effect of the stelazine. Why am I here? he asked himself. The ambiguity of his

situation did not escape him. He was here to advance his career in the Party apparatus, to obtain the intimate and personal nod of approval from His Greatness… and in addition he was here to decipher His Greatness as a fraud; he did not know what variety of fraud, but there it was: fraud against the Party, against all the peace-loving democratic peoples of Terra. Ironic, he thought. And continued to mingle.

A girl with small, bright, illuminated breasts approached him for a match; he absent-mindedly got out his lighter. “What makes your breasts glow?” he asked her. “Radioactive injections?”

She shrugged, said nothing, passed on, leaving him alone. Evidently he had responded in the incorrect way.

Maybe it’s a wartime mutation, he pondered.

“Drink, sir.” A servant graciously held out a tray; he accepted a martini — which was the current fad among the higher Party classes in People’s China — and sipped the ice-cold dry flavor. Good English gin, he said to himself. Or possibly the original Holland compound; juniper or whatever they added. Not bad. He strolled on, feeling better; in actuality he found the atmosphere here a pleasant one. The people here were self-assured; they had been successful and now they could relax. It evidently was a myth that proximity to His Greatness produced neurotic anxiety: he saw no evidence here, at least, and felt little himself.

A heavyset elderly man, bald, halted him by the simple means of holding his drink glass against Chien’s chest. “That frably little one who asked you for a match,” the elderly man said, and sniggered. “The quig with the Christmas-tree breasts — that was a boy, in drag.” He giggled. “You have to be cautious around here.”

“Where, if anywhere,” Chien said, “do I find authentic women? In white ties and tails?”

“Darn near,” the elderly man said, and departed with a throng of hyperactive guests, leaving Chien alone with his martini.

A handsome, tall woman, well dressed, standing near Chien, suddenly put her hand on his arm; he felt her fingers tense and she said, “Here he comes. His Greatness. This is the first time for me; I’m a little scared. Does my hair look all right?”

“Fine,” Chien said reflexively, and followed her gaze, seeking a glimpse — his first — of the Absolute Benefactor.

What crossed the room toward the table in the center was not a man.

And it was not, Chien realized, a mechanical construct either; it was not what he had seen on TV. That evidently was simply a device for speechmaking, as Mussolini had once used an artificial arm to salute long and tedious processions.

God, he thought, and felt ill. Was this what Tanya Lee had called the “aquatic horror” shape? It had no shape. Nor pseudopodia, either flesh or metal. It was, in a sense, not there at all; when he managed to look directly at it, the shape vanished; he saw through it, saw the people on the far side — but not it. Yet if he turned his head, caught it out of a sidelong glance, he could determine its boundaries.

It was terrible; it blasted him with its awareness. As it moved it drained the life from each person in turn; it ate the people who had assembled, passed on, ate again, ate more with an endless appetite. It hated; he felt its hate. It loathed; he felt its loathing for everyone present — in fact he shared its loathing. All at once he and everyone else in the big villa were each a twisted slug, and over the fallen slug carcasses the creature savored, lingered, but all the time coming directly toward him — or was that an illusion? If this is a hallucination, Chien thought, it is the worst I have ever had; if it is not, then it is evil reality; it’s an evil thing that kills and injures. He saw the trail of stepped-on, mashed men and women remnants behind it;

he saw them trying to reassemble, to operate their crippled bodies; he heard them attempting speech.

I know who you are, Tung Chien thought to himself. You, the supreme head of the worldwide Party structure. You, who destroy whatever living object you touch; I see that Arabic poem, the searching for the flowers of life to eat them — I see you astride the plain which to you is Earth, plain without hills, without valleys. You go anywhere, appear any time, devour anything; you engineer life and then guzzle it, and you enjoy that.

"Mr. Chien," the voice said, but it came from inside his head, not from the mouthless spirit that fashioned itself directly before him. "It is good to meet you again. You know nothing. Go away. I have no interest in you. Why should I care about slime? Slime; I am mired in it, I must excrete it, and I choose to. I could break you; I can break even myself. Sharp stones are under me; I spread sharp pointed things upon the mire. I make the hiding places, the deep places, boil like a pot; to me the sea is like a lot of ointment. The flakes of my flesh are joined to everything. You are me. I am you. It makes no difference, just as it makes no difference whether the creature with ignited breasts is a girl or boy; you could learn to enjoy either." It laughed.

He could not believe it was speaking to him; he could not imagine — it was too terrible — that it had picked him out.

"I have picked everybody out," it said. "No one is too small, each falls and dies and I am there to watch. I don't need to do anything but watch; it is automatic; it was arranged that way." And then it ceased talking to him; it disjoined itself. But he still saw it; he felt its manifold presence. It was a globe which hung in the room, with fifty thousand eyes, a million eyes — billions: an eye for each living thing as it waited for each thing to fall, and then stepped on the living thing as it lay in a broken state. Because of this it had created the things, and he knew; he understood. What had seemed in the Arabic poem to be death was not death but God; or rather God was death, it was one force, one hunter, one cannibal thing, and it missed again and again but, having all eternity, it could afford to miss. Both poems, he

realized; the Dryden one too. The crumbling; that is our world and you are doing it. Warping it to come out that way; bending us.

But at least, he thought, I still have my dignity. With dignity he set down his drink glass, turned, walked toward the doors of the room. He passed through the doors. He walked down a long carpeted hall. A villa servant dressed in purple opened a door for him; he found himself standing out in the night darkness, on a veranda, alone.

Not alone.

It had followed after him. Or it had already been here before him; yes, it had been expecting. It was not really through with him.

“Here I go,” he said, and made a dive for the railing; it was six stories down, and there below gleamed the river and death, not what the Arabic poem had seen.

As he tumbled over, it put an extension of itself on his shoulder.

“Why?” he said. But, in fact, he paused. Wondering. Not understanding, not at all.

“Don’t fall on my account,” it said. He could not see it because it had moved behind him. But the piece of it on his shoulder — it had begun to look like a human hand. And then it laughed.

“What’s funny?” he demanded, as he teetered on the railing, held back by its pseudo-hand.

“You’re doing my task for me,” it said. “You aren’t waiting; don’t have time to wait? I’ll select you out from among the others; you don’t need to speed the process up.”

“What if I do?” he said. “Out of revulsion for you?”

It laughed. And didn’t answer.

“You won’t even say,” he said.

Again no answer. He started to slide back, onto the veranda. And at once the pressure of its pseudo-hand lifted.

“You founded the Party?” he asked.

“I founded everything. I founded the anti-Party and the Party that isn’t a Party, and those who are for it and those who are against, those that you call Yankee Imperialists, those in the camp of reaction, and so on endlessly. I founded it all. As if they were blades of grass.”

“And you’re here to enjoy it?” he said.

“What I want,” it said, “is for you to see me, as I am, as you have seen me, and then trust me.”

“What?” he said, quavering. “Trust you to what?”

It said, “Do you believe in me?”

“Yes,” he said. “I can see you.”

“Then go back to your job at the Ministry. Tell Tanya Lee that you saw an overworked, overweight, elderly man who drinks too much and likes to pinch girls’ rear ends.”

“Oh, Christ,” he said.

“As you live on, unable to stop, I will torment you,” it said. “I will deprive you, item by item, of everything you possess or want. And then

when you are crushed to death I will unfold a mystery."

"What's the mystery?"

"The dead shall live, the living die. I kill what lives; I save what has died. And I will tell you this: *there are things worse than I.* But you won't meet them because by then I will have killed you. Now walk back into the dining room and prepare for dinner. Don't question what I'm doing; I did it long before there was a Tung Chien and I will do it long after."

He hit it as hard as he could.

And experienced violent pain in his head.

And darkness, with the sense of falling.

After that, darkness again. He thought, I will get you. I will see that you die too. That you suffer; you're going to suffer, just like us, exactly in every way we do. I'll nail you; I swear to God I'll nail you up somewhere. And it will hurt. As much as I hurt now.

He shut his eyes.

Roughly, he was shaken. And heard Mr. Kimo Okubara's voice. "Get to your feet, common drunk. Come on!"

Without opening his eyes he said, "Get me a cab."

"Cab already waiting. You go home. Disgrace. Make a violent scene out of yourself."

Getting shakily to his feet, he opened his eyes and examined himself. Our leader whom we follow, he thought, is the One True God. And the enemy whom we fight and have fought is God too. They are right; he is everywhere. But I didn't understand what that meant. Staring at the protocol

officer, he thought, You are God too. So there is no getting away, probably not even by jumping. As I started, instinctively, to do. He shuddered.

"Mix drinks with drugs," Okubara said witheringly. "Ruin career. I see it happen many times. Get lost."

Unsteadily, he walked toward the great central door of the Yangtze River villa; two servants, dressed like medieval knights, with crested plumes, ceremoniously opened the door for him and one of them said, "Good night, sir."

"Up yours," Chien said, and passed out into the night.

At a quarter to three in the morning, as he sat sleepless in the living room of his conapt, smoking one Cuesta Rey Astoria after another, a knock sounded at the door.

When he opened it he found himself facing Tanya Lee in her trenchcoat, her face pinched with cold. Her eyes blazed, questioningly.

"Don't look at me like that," he said roughly. His cigar had gone out; he relit it. "I've been looked at enough," he said.

"You saw it," she said.

He nodded.

She seated herself on the arm of the couch and after a time she said, "Want to tell me about it?"

"Go as far from here as possible," he said. "Go a long way." And then he remembered: no way was long enough. He remembered reading that too. "Forget it," he said; rising to his feet, he walked clumsily into the kitchen to start up the coffee.

Following after him, Tanya said, “Was — it that bad?”

“We can’t win,” he said. “You can’t win; I don’t mean me. I’m not in this; I just wanted to do my job at the Ministry and forget it. Forget the whole damned thing.”

“Is it nonterrestrial?”

“Yes.” He nodded.

“Is it hostile to us?”

“Yes,” he said. “No. Both. Mostly hostile.”

“Then we have to —”

“Go home,” he said, “and go to bed.” He looked her over carefully; he had sat a long time and he had done a great deal of thinking. About a lot of things. “Are you married?” he said.

“No. Not now. I used to be.”

He said, “Stay with me tonight. The rest of tonight, anyhow. Until the sun comes up.” He added, “The night part is awful.”

“I’ll stay,” Tanya said, unbuckling the belt of her raincoat, “but I have to have some answers.”

“What did Dryden mean,” Chien said, “about music untuning the sky? I don’t get that. What does music do to the sky?”

“All the celestial order of the universe ends,” she said as she hung her raincoat up in the closet of the bedroom; under it she wore an orange striped

sweater and stretch-pants.

He said, “And that’s bad?”

Pausing, she reflected. “I don’t know. I guess so.”

“It’s a lot of power,” he said, “to assign to music.”

“Well, you know that old Pythagorean business about the ‘music of the spheres.’ ” Matter-of-factly she seated herself on the bed and removed her slipperlike shoes.

“Do you believe in that?” he said. “Or do you believe in God?”

” ‘God’!” She laughed. “That went out with the donkey steam engine. What are you talking about? God, or god?” She came over close beside him, peering into his face.

“Don’t look at me so closely,” he said sharply drawing back. “I don’t ever want to be looked at again.” He moved away, irritably.

“I think,” Tanya said, “that if there is a God He has very little interest in human affairs. That’s my theory, anyhow. I mean, He doesn’t seem to care if evil triumphs or people or animals get hurt and die. I frankly don’t see Him anywhere around. And the Party has always denied any form of —”

“Did you ever see Him?” he asked. “When you were a child?”

“Oh, sure, as a child. But I also believed —”

“Did it ever occur to you,” Chien said, “that good and evil are names for the same thing? That God could be both good and evil at the same time?”

“I’ll fix you a drink,” Tanya said, and padded barefoot into the kitchen.

Chien said, “The Crusher. The Clanker. The Gulper and the Bird and the Climbing Tube — plus other names, forms, I don’t know. I had a hallucination. At the stag dinner. A big one. A terrible one.”

“But the stelazine —”

“It brought on a worse one,” he said.

“Is there any way,” Tanya said somberly, “that we can fight this thing you saw? This apparition you call a hallucination but which very obviously was not?”

He said, “Believe in it.”

“What will that do?”

“Nothing,” he said wearily. “Nothing at all. I’m tired; I don’t want a drink — let’s just go to bed.”

“Okay.” She padded back into the bedroom, began pulling her striped sweater over her head. “We’ll discuss it more thoroughly later.”

“A hallucination,” Chien said, “is merciful. I wish I had it; I want mine back. I want to be before your peddler got me with that phenothiazine.”

“Just come to bed. It’ll be toasty. All warm and nice.”

He removed his tie, his shirt — and saw, on his right shoulder, the mark, the stigma, which it had left when it stopped him from jumping. Livid marks which looked as if they would never go away. He put his pajama top on then; it hid the marks.

“Anyhow,” Tanya said as he got into the bed beside her, “your career is immeasurably advanced. Aren’t you glad about that?”

“Sure,” he said, nodding sightlessly in the darkness. “Very glad.”

“Come over against me,” Tanya said, putting her arms around him. “And forget everything else. At least for now.”

He tugged her against him then, doing what she asked and what he wanted to do. She was neat; she was swiftly active; she was successful and she did her part. They did not bother to speak until at last she said, “Oh!” And then she relaxed.

“I wish,” he said, “that we could go on forever.”

“We did,” Tanya said. “It’s outside of time; it’s boundless, like an ocean. It’s the way we were in Cambrian times, before we migrated up onto the land; it’s the ancient primary waters. This is the only time we get to go back, when this is done. That’s why it means so much. And in those days we weren’t separate; it was like a big jelly, like those blobs that float up on the beach.”

“Float up,” he said, “and are left there to die.”

“Could you get me a towel?” Tanya asked. “Or a washcloth? I need it.”

He padded into the bathroom for a towel. There — he was naked now — he once more saw his shoulder, saw where it had seized hold of him and held on, dragged him back, possibly to toy with him a little more.

The marks, unaccountably, were bleeding.

He sponged the blood away. More oozed forth at once and, seeing that, he wondered how much time he had left. Probably only hours.

Returning to bed, he said, “Could you continue?”

“Sure. If you have any energy left; it’s up to you.” She lay gazing up at him unwinkingly, barely visible in the dim nocturnal light.

“I have,” he said. And hugged her to him.

The Story to End All Stories for Harlan Ellison's Anthology *Dangerous Visions*

In a hydrogen war ravaged society the nubile young women go down to a futuristic zoo and have sexual intercourse with various deformed and nonhuman life forms in the cages. In this particular account a woman who has been patched together out of the damaged bodies of several women has intercourse with an alien female, there in the cage, and later on the woman, by means of futuristic science, conceives. The infant is born, and she and the female in the cage fight over it to see who gets it. The human young woman wins, and promptly eats the offspring, hair, teeth, toes and all. Just after she has finished she discovers that the offspring is God.

The Electric Ant

At four-fifteen in the afternoon, T.S.T., Garson Poole woke up in his hospital bed, knew that he lay in a hospital bed in a three-bed ward and realized in addition two things: that he no longer had a right hand and that he felt no pain.

They had given me a strong analgesic, he said to himself as he stared at the far wall with its window showing downtown New York. Webs in which vehicles and peds darted and wheeled glimmered in the late afternoon sun, and the brilliance of the aging light pleased him. It's not yet out, he thought. And neither am I.

A fone lay on the table beside his bed; he hesitated, then picked it up and dialed for an outside line. A moment later he was faced by Louis Danceman, in charge of Tri-Plan's activities while he, Garson Poole, was elsewhere.

"Thank God you're alive," Danceman said, seeing him; his big, fleshy face with its moon's surface of pock marks flattened with relief. "I've been calling all —"

"I just don't have a right hand," Poole said.

"But you'll be okay. I mean, they can graft another one on."

"How long have I been here?" Poole said. He wondered where the nurses and doctors had gone to; why weren't they clucking and fussing about him making a call?

"Four days," Danceman said. "Everything here at the plant is going splunkishly. In fact we've splunked orders from three separate police

systems, all here on Terra. Two in Ohio, one in Wyoming. Good solid orders, with one third in advance and the usual three-year lease-option."

"Come get me out of here," Poole said.

"I can't get you out until the new hand —"

"I'll have it done later." He wanted desperately to get back to familiar surroundings; memory of the mercantile squib looming grotesquely on the pilot screen careened at the back of his mind; if he shut his eyes he felt himself back in his damaged craft as it plunged from one vehicle to another, piling up enormous damage as it went. The kinetic sensations… he winced, recalling them. I guess I'm lucky, he said to himself.

"Is Sarah Benton there with you?" Danceman asked.

"No." Of course; his personal secretary — if only for job considerations — would be hovering close by, mothering him in her jejune, infantile way. All heavyset women like to mother people, he thought. And they're dangerous; if they fall on you they can kill you. "Maybe that's what happened to me," he said aloud. "Maybe Sarah fell on my squib."

"No, no; a tie rod in the steering fin of your squib split apart during the heavy rush-hour traffic and you —"

"I remember." He turned in his bed as the door of the ward opened; a white-clad doctor and two blue-clad nurses appeared, making their way toward his bed. "I'll talk to you later," Poole said and hung up the fone. He took a deep, expectant breath.

"You shouldn't be foning quite so soon," the doctor said as he studied his chart. "Mr. Garson Poole, owner of Tri-Plan Electronics. Maker of random ident darts that track their prey for a circle-radius of a thousand miles, responding to unique enceph wave patterns. You're a successful man, Mr. Poole. But, Mr. Poole, you're not a man. You're an electric ant."

“Christ,” Poole said, stunned.

“So we can’t really treat you here, now that we’ve found out. We knew, of course, as soon as we examined your injured right hand; we saw the electronic components and then we made torso x-rays and of course they bore out our hypothesis.”

“What,” Poole said, “is an ‘electric ant’?” But he knew; he could decipher the term.

A nurse said, “An organic robot.”

“I see,” Poole said. Frigid perspiration rose to the surface of his skin, across all his body.

“You didn’t know,” the doctor said.

“No.” Poole shook his head.

The doctor said, “We get an electric ant every week or so. Either brought in here from a squib accident — like yourself — or one seeking voluntary admission… one who, like yourself, has never been told, who has functioned alongside humans, believing himself — itself — human. As to your hand —” He paused.

“Forget my hand,” Poole said savagely.

“Be calm.” The doctor leaned over him, peered acutely down into Poole’s face. “We’ll have a hospital boat convey you over to a service facility where repairs, or replacement, on your hand can be made at a reasonable expense, either to yourself, if you’re self-owned, or to your owners, if such there are. In any case you’ll be back at your desk at Tri-Plan functioning just as before.”

“Except,” Poole said, “now I know.” He wondered if Danceman or Sarah or any of the others at the office knew. Had they — or one of them — purchased him? Designed him? A figurehead, he said to himself; that’s all I’ve been. I must never really have run the company; it was a delusion implanted in me when I was made… along with the delusion that I am human and alive.

“Before you leave for the repair facility,” the doctor said, “could you kindly settle your bill at the front desk?”

Poole said acidly, “How can there be a bill if you don’t treat ants here?”

“For our services,” the nurse said. “Up until the point we knew.”

“Bill me,” Poole said, with furious, impotent anger. “Bill my firm.” With massive effort he managed to sit up; his head swimming, he stepped haltingly from the bed and onto the floor. “I’ll be glad to leave here,” he said as he rose to a standing position. “And thank you for your humane attention.”

“Thank you, too, Mr. Poole,” the doctor said. “Or rather I should say just Poole.”

At the repair facility he had his missing hand replaced.

It proved fascinating, the hand; he examined it for a long time before he let the technicians install it. On the surface it appeared organic — in fact on the surface, it was. Natural skin covered natural flesh, and true blood filled the veins and capillaries. But, beneath that, wires and circuits, miniaturized components, gleamed… looking deep into the wrist he saw surge gates, motors, multi-stage valves, all very small. Intricate. And — the hand cost forty frogs. A week’s salary, insofar as he drew it from the company payroll.

“Is this guaranteed?” he asked the technicians as they fused the “bone” section of the hand to the balance of his body.

“Ninety days, parts and labor,” one of the technicians said. “Unless subjected to unusual or intentional abuse.”

“That sounds vaguely suggestive,” Poole said.

The technician, a man — all of them were men — said, regarding him keenly, “You’ve been posing?”

“Unintentionally,” Poole said.

“And now it’s intentional?”

Poole said, “Exactly.”

“Do you know why you never guessed? There must have been signs… clickings and whirrings from inside you, now and then. You never guessed because you were programmed not to notice. You’ll now have the same difficulty finding out why you were built and for whom you’ve been operating.”

“A slave,” Poole said. “A mechanical slave.”

“You’ve had fun.”

“I’ve lived a good life,” Poole said. “I’ve worked hard.”

He paid the facility its forty frogs, flexed his new fingers, tested them out by picking up various objects such as coins, then departed. Ten minutes later he was aboard a public carrier, on his way home. It had been quite a day.

At home, in his one-room apartment, he poured himself a shot of Jack Daniel's Purple Label — sixty years old — and sat sipping it, meanwhile gazing through his sole window at the building on the opposite side of the street. Shall I go to the office? he asked himself. If so, why? If not, why? Choose one. Christ, he thought, it undermines you, knowing this. I'm a freak, he realized. An inanimate object mimicking an animate one. But — he felt alive. Yet… he felt differently, now. About himself. Hence about everyone, especially Danceman and Sarah, everyone at Tri-Plan.

I think I'll kill myself, he said to himself. But I'm probably programmed not to do that; it would be a costly waste which my owner would have to absorb. And he wouldn't want to.

Programmed. In me somewhere, he thought, there is a matrix fitted in place, a grid screen that cuts me off from certain thoughts, certain actions. And forces me into others. I am not free. I never was, but now I know it; that makes it different.

Turning his window to opaque, he snapped on the overhead light, carefully set about removing his clothing, piece by piece. He had watched carefully as the technicians at the repair facility had attached his new hand: he had a rather clear idea, now, of how his body had been assembled. Two major panels, one in each thigh; the technicians had removed the panels to check the circuit complexes beneath. If I'm programmed, he decided, the matrix probably can be found there.

The maze of circuitry baffled him. I need help, he said to himself. Let's see… what's the fone code for the class BBB computer we hire at the office?

He picked up the fone, dialed the computer at its permanent location in Boise, Idaho.

"Use of this computer is prorated at a five frogs per minute basis," a mechanical voice from the fone said. "Please hold your mastercreditchargeplate before the screen."

He did so.

“At the sound of the buzzer you will be connected with the computer,” the voice continued. “Please query it as rapidly as possible, taking into account the fact that its answer will be given in terms of a microsecond, while your query will —” He turned the sound down, then. But quickly turned it up as the blank audio input of the computer appeared on the screen. At this moment the computer had become a giant ear, listening to him — as well as fifty thousand other queriers throughout Terra.

“Scan me visually,” he instructed the computer. “And tell me where I will find the programming mechanism which controls my thoughts and behavior.” He waited. On the fone’s screen a great active eye, multi-lensed, peered at him; he displayed himself for it, there in his one-room apartment.

The computer said, “Remove your chest panel. Apply pressure at your breastbone and then ease outward.”

He did so. A section of his chest came off; dizzily, he set it down on the floor.

“I can distinguish control modules,” the computer said, “but I can’t tell which —” It paused as its eye roved about on the fone screen. “I distinguish a roll of punched tape mounted above your heart mechanism. Do you see it?” Poole craned his neck, peered. He saw it, too. “I will have to sign off,” the computer said. “After I have examined the data available to me I will contact you and give you an answer. Good day.” The screen died out.

I’ll yank the tape out of me, Poole said to himself. Tiny… no larger than two spools of thread, with a scanner mounted between the delivery drum and the take-up drum. He could not see any sign of motion; the spools seemed inert. They must cut in as override, he reflected, when specific situations occur. Override to my encephalic processes. And they’ve been doing it all my life.

He reached down, touched the delivery drum. All I have to do is tear this out, he thought, and —

The fone screen relit. “Mastercreditchargeplate number 3-BNX-882-HQR446-T,” the computer’s voice came. “This is BBB-307DR recontacting you in response to your query of sixteen seconds lapse, November 4, 1992. The punched tape roll above your heart mechanism is not a programming turret but is in fact a reality-supply construct. All sense stimuli received by your central neurological system emanate from that unit and tampering with it would be risky if not terminal.” It added, “You appear to have no programming circuit. Query answered. Good day.” It flicked off.

Poole, standing naked before the fone screen, touched the tape drum once again, with calculated, enormous caution. I see, he thought wildly. Or do I see? This unit —

If I cut the tape, he realized, my world will disappear. Reality will continue for others, but not for me. Because my reality, my universe, is coming to me from this minuscule unit. Fed into the scanner and then into my central nervous system as it snailishly unwinds.

It has been unwinding for years, he decided.

Getting his clothes, he redressed, seated himself in his big armchair — a luxury imported into his apartment from Tri-Plan’s main offices — and lit a tobacco cigarette. His hands shook as he laid down his initialed lighter; leaning back, he blew smoke before himself, creating a nimbus of gray.

I have to go slowly, he said to himself. What am I trying to do? Bypass my programming? But the computer found no programming circuit. Do I want to interfere with the reality tape? And if so, *why?*

Because, he thought, if I control that, I control reality. At least so far as I’m concerned. My subjective reality… but that’s all there is. Objective reality is a synthetic construct, dealing with a hypothetical universalization of a multitude of subjective realities.

My universe is lying within my fingers, he realized. If I can just figure out how the damn thing works. All I set out to do originally was to search for and locate my programming circuit so I could gain true homeostatic functioning: control of myself. But with this —

With this he did not merely gain control of himself; he gained control over everything.

And this sets me apart from every human who ever lived and died, he thought somberly.

Going over to the fone he dialed his office. When he had Danceman on the screen he said briskly, “I want you to send a complete set of microtools and enlarging screen over to my apartment. I have some microcircuitry to work on.” Then he broke the connection, not wanting to discuss it.

A half hour later a knock sounded on his door. When he opened up he found himself facing one of the shop foremen, loaded down with microtools of every sort. “You didn’t say exactly what you wanted,” the foreman said, entering the apartment. “So Mr. Danceman had me bring everything.”

“And the enlarging-lens system?”

“In the truck, up on the roof.”

Maybe what I want to do, Poole thought, is die. He lit a cigarette, stood smoking and waiting as the shop foreman lugged the heavy enlarging screen, with its power-supply and control panel, into the apartment. This is suicide, what I’m doing here. He shuddered.

“Anything wrong, Mr. Poole?” the shop foreman said as he rose to his feet, relieved of the burden of the enlarging-lens system. “You must still be rickety on your pins from your accident.”

“Yes,” Poole said quietly. He stood tautly waiting until the foreman left. Under the enlarging-lens system the plastic tape assumed a new shape: a wide track along which hundreds of thousands of punch-holes worked their way. I thought so, Poole thought. Not recorded as charges on a ferrous oxide layer but actually punched-free slots.

Under the lens the strip of tape visibly oozed forward. Very slowly, but it did, at uniform velocity, move in the direction of the scanner.

The way I figure it, he thought, is that the punched holes are *on* gates. It functions like a player piano; solid is no, punch-hole is yes. How can I test this?

Obviously by filling in a number of holes.

He measured the amount of tape left on the delivery spool, calculated — at great effort — the velocity of the tape’s movement, and then came up with a figure. If he altered the tape visible at the ingoing edge of the scanner, five to seven hours would pass before that particular time period arrived. He would in effect be painting out stimuli due a few hours from now.

With a microbrush he swabbed a large — relatively large — section of tape with opaque varnish… obtained from the supply kit accompanying the microtools. I have smeared out stimuli for about half an hour, he pondered. Have covered at least a thousand punches.

It would be interesting to see what change, if any, overcame his environment, six hours from now.

Five and a half hours later he sat at Krackter’s, a superb bar in Manhattan, having a drink with Danceman.

“You look bad,” Danceman said.

“I am bad,” Poole said. He finished his drink, a Scotch sour, and ordered another.

“From the accident?”

“In a sense, yes.”

Danceman said, “Is it — something you found out about yourself?”

Raising his head, Poole eyed him in the murky light of the bar. “Then you know.”

“I know,” Danceman said, “that I should call you ‘Poole’ instead of ‘Mr. Poole.’ But I prefer the latter, and will continue to do so.”

“How long have you known?” Poole said.

“Since you took over the firm. I was told that the actual owners of Tri-Plan, who are located in the Prox System, wanted Tri-Plan run by an electric ant whom they could control. They wanted a brilliant and forceful —”

“The real owners?” This was the first he had heard about that. “We have two thousand stockholders. Scattered everywhere.”

“Marvis Bey and her husband Ernan, on Prox 4, control fifty-one percent of the voting stock. This has been true from the start.”

“Why didn’t I know?”

“I was told not to tell you. You were to think that you yourself made all company policy. With my help. But actually I was feeding you what the Beys fed to me.”

“I’m a figurehead,” Poole said.

“In a sense, yes.” Danceman nodded. “But you’ll always be ‘Mr. Poole’ to me.”

A section of the far wall vanished. And with it, several people at tables nearby. And —

Through the big glass side of the bar, the skyline of New York City flickered out of existence.

Seeing his face, Danceman said, “What is it?”

Poole said hoarsely, “Look around. Do you see any changes?”

After looking around the room, Danceman said, “No. What like?”

“You still see the skyline?”

“Sure. Smoggy as it is. The lights wink —”

“Now I know,” Poole said. He had been right; every punch-hole covered up meant the disappearance of some object in his reality world. Standing, he said, “I’ll see you later, Danceman. I have to get back to my apartment; there’s some work I’m doing. Goodnight.” He strode from the bar and out onto the street, searching for a cab.

No cabs.

Those, too, he thought. I wonder what else I painted over. Prostitutes? Flowers? Prisons?

There, in the bar’s parking lot, Danceman’s squib. I’ll take that, he decided. There are still cabs in Danceman’s world; he can get one later. Anyhow it’s a company car, and I hold a copy of the key.

Presently he was in the air, turning toward his apartment.

New York City had not returned. To the left and right vehicles and buildings, streets, ped-runners, signs… and in the center nothing. How can I fly into that? he asked himself. I'd disappear.

Or would I? He flew toward the nothingness.

Smoking one cigarette after another he flew in a circle for fifteen minutes… and then, soundlessly, New York reappeared. He could finish his trip. He stubbed out his cigarette (a waste of something so valuable) and shot off in the direction of his apartment.

If I insert a narrow opaque strip, he pondered as he unlocked his apartment door, I can —

His thoughts ceased. Someone sat in his living room chair, watching a captain kirk on the TV. "Sarah," he said, nettled.

She rose, well-padded but graceful. "You weren't at the hospital, so I came here. I still have that key you gave me back in March after we had that awful argument. Oh… you look so depressed." She came up to him, peeped into his face anxiously. "Does your injury hurt that badly?"

"It's not that." He removed his coat, tie, shirt, and then his chest panel; kneeling down he began inserting his hands into the microtool gloves. Pausing, he looked up at her and said, "I found out I'm an electric ant. Which from one standpoint opens up certain possibilities, which I am exploring now." He flexed his fingers and, at the far end of the left waldo, a micro screwdriver moved, magnified into visibility by the enlarging-lens system. "You can watch," he informed her. "If you so desire."

She had begun to cry.

“What’s the matter?” he demanded savagely, without looking up from his work.

“I — it’s just so sad. You’ve been such a good employer to all of us at Tri-Plan. We respect you so. And now it’s all changed.”

The plastic tape had an unpunched margin at top and bottom; he cut a horizontal strip, very narrow, then, after a moment of great concentration, cut the tape itself four hours away from the scanning head. He then rotated the cut strip into a right-angle piece in relation to the scanner, fused it in place with a micro heat element, then reattached the tape reel to its left and right sides. He had, in effect, inserted a dead twenty minutes into the unfolding flow of his reality. It would take effect — according to his calculations — a few minutes after midnight.

“Are you fixing yourself?” Sarah asked timidly.

Poole said, “I’m freeing myself.” Beyond this he had several alterations in mind. But first he had to test his theory; blank, unpunched tape meant no stimuli, in which case the *lack* of tape…

“That look on your face,” Sarah said. She began gathering up her purse, coat, rolled-up aud-vid magazine. “I’ll go; I can see how you feel about finding me here.”

“Stay,” he said. “I’ll watch the captain kirk with you.” He got into his shirt. “Remember years ago when there were — what was it? — twenty or twenty-two TV channels? Before the government shut down the independents?”

She nodded.

“What would it have looked like,” he said, “if this TV set projected all channels onto the cathode ray screen *at the same time?* Could we have distinguished anything, in the mixture?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Maybe we could learn to. Learn to be selective; do our own job of perceiving what we wanted to and what we didn’t. Think of the possibilities, if our brains could handle twenty images at once; think of the amount of knowledge which could be stored during a given period. I wonder if the brain, the human brain —” He broke off. “the human brain couldn’t do it,” he said, presently, reflecting to himself. “But in theory a quasi-organic brain might.”

“Is that what you have?” Sarah asked.

“Yes,” Poole said.

They watched the captain kirk to its end, and then they went to bed. But Poole sat up against his pillows, smoking and brooding. Beside him, Sarah stirred restlessly, wondering why he did not turn off the light.

Eleven-fifty. It would happen anytime, now.

“Sarah,” he said. “I want your help. In a very few minutes something strange will happen to me. It won’t last long, but I want you to watch me carefully. See if I —” He gestured. “Show any changes. If I seem to go to sleep, or if I talk nonsense, or —” He wanted to say, if I disappear. But he did not. “I won’t do you any harm, but I think it might be a good idea if you armed yourself. Do you have your anti-mugging gun with you?”

“In my purse.” She had become fully awake now; sitting up in bed, she gazed at him with wild fright, her ample shoulders tanned and freckled in the light of the room.

He got her gun for her.

The room stiffened into paralyzed immobility. Then the colors began to drain away. Objects diminished until, smoke-like, they flitted away into shadows. Darkness filmed everything as the objects in the room became weaker and weaker.

The last stimuli are dying out, Poole realized. He squinted, trying to see. He made out Sarah Benton, sitting in the bed: a two-dimensional figure that doll-like had been propped up, there to fade and dwindle. Random gusts of dematerialized substance eddied about in unstable clouds; the elements collected, fell apart, then collected once again. And then the last heat, energy and light dissipated; the room closed over and fell into itself, as if sealed off from reality. And at that point absolute blackness replaced everything, space without depth, not nocturnal but rather stiff and unyielding. And in addition he heard nothing.

Reaching, he tried to touch something. But he had nothing to reach with. Awareness of his own body had departed along with everything else in the universe. He had no hands, and even if he had, there would be nothing for them to feel.

I am still right about the way the damn tape works, he said to himself, using a nonexistent mouth to communicate an invisible message.

Will this pass in ten minutes? he asked himself. Am I right about that, too? He waited… but knew intuitively that his time sense had departed with everything else. I can only wait, he realized. And hope it won’t be long.

To pace himself, he thought, I’ll make up an encyclopedia; I’ll try to list everything that begins with an “a.” Let’s see. He pondered. Apple, automobile, acksetron, atmosphere, Atlantic, tomato aspic, advertising — he thought on and on, categories slithering through his fright-haunted mind.

All at once light flickered on.

He lay on the couch in the living room, and mild sunlight spilled in through the single window. Two men bent over him, their hands full of tools. Maintenance men, he realized. They've been working on me.

"He's conscious," one of the technicians said. He rose, stood back; Sarah Benton, dithering with anxiety, replaced him.

"Thank God!" she said, breathing wetly in Poole's ear. "I was so afraid; I called Mr. Danceman finally about —"

"What happened?" Poole broke in harshly. "Start from the beginning and for God's sake speak slowly. So I can assimilate it all."

Sarah composed herself, paused to rub her nose, and then plunged on nervously, "You passed out. You just lay there, as if you were dead. I waited until two-thirty and you did nothing. I called Mr. Danceman, waking him up unfortunately, and he called the electric-ant maintenance — I mean, the organic-roby maintenance people, and these two men came about four forty-five, and they've been working on you ever since. It's now six fifteen in the morning. And I'm very cold and I want to go to bed; I can't make it in to the office today; I really can't." She turned away, sniffling. The sound annoyed him.

One of the uniformed maintenance men said, "You've been playing around with your reality tape."

"Yes," Poole said. Why deny it? Obviously they had found the inserted solid strip. "I shouldn't have been out that long," he said. "I inserted a ten minute strip only."

"It shut off the tape transport," the technician explained. "The tape stopped moving forward; your insertion jammed it, and it automatically shut down to avoid tearing the tape. Why would you want to fiddle around with that? Don't you know what you could do?"

“I’m not sure,” Poole said.

“But you have a good idea.”

Poole said acridly, “That’s why I’m doing it.”

“Your bill,” the maintenance man said, “is going to be ninety-five frogs. Payable in installments, if you so desire.”

“Okay,” he said; he sat up groggily, rubbed his eyes and grimaced. His head ached and his stomach felt totally empty.

“Shave the tape next time,” the primary technician told him. “That way it won’t jam. Didn’t it occur to you that it had a safety factor built into it? So it would stop rather than —”

“What happens,” Poole interrupted, his voice low and intently careful, “if no tape passed under the scanner? No tape — nothing at all. The photocell shining upward without impedance?”

The technicians glanced at each other. One said, “All the neuro circuits jump their gaps and short out.”

“Meaning what?” Poole said.

“Meaning it’s the end of the mechanism.”

Poole said, “I’ve examined the circuit. It doesn’t carry enough voltage to do that. Metal won’t fuse under such slight loads of current, even if the terminals are touching. We’re talking about a millionth of a watt along a cesium channel perhaps a sixteenth of an inch in length. Let’s assume there are a billion possible combinations at one instant arising from the punch-outs on the tape. The total output isn’t cumulative; the amount of current depends on what the battery details for that module, and it’s not much. With all gates open and going.”

“Would we lie?” one of the technicians asked wearily.

“Why not?” Poole said. “Here I have an opportunity to experience everything. Simultaneously. To know the universe and its entirety, to be momentarily in contact with all reality. Something that no human can do. A symphonic score entering my brain outside of time, all notes, all instruments sounding at once. And all symphonies. Do you see?”

“It’ll burn you out,” both technicians said, together.

“I don’t think so,” Poole said.

Sarah said, “Would you like a cup of coffee, Mr. Poole?”

“Yes,” he said; he lowered his legs, pressed his cold feet against the floor, shuddered. He then stood up. His body ached. They had me lying all night on the couch, he realized. All things considered, they could have done better than that.

At the kitchen table in the far corner of the room, Garson Poole sat sipping coffee across from Sarah. The technicians had long since gone.

“You’re not going to try any more experiments on yourself, are you?” Sarah asked wistfully.

Poole grated, “I would like to control time. To reverse it.” I will cut a segment of tape out, he thought, and fuse it in upside down. The causal sequences will then flow the other way. Thereupon I will walk backward down the steps from the roof field, back up to my door, push a locked door open, walk backward to the sink, where I will get out a stack of dirty dishes. I will seat myself at this table before the stack, fill each dish with food produced from my stomach… I will then transfer the food to the refrigerator. The next day I will take the food out of the refrigerator, pack it in bags, carry the bags to a supermarket, distribute the food here and there in the store. And at last, at the front counter, they will pay me money for

this, from their cash register. The food will be packed with other food in big plastic boxes, shipped out of the city into the hydroponic plants on the Atlantic, there to be joined back to trees and bushes or the bodies of dead animals or pushed deep into the ground. But what would all that prove? A video tape running backward… I would know no more than I know now, which is not enough.

What I want, he realized, is ultimate and absolute reality, for one microsecond. After that it doesn't matter, because all will be known; nothing will be left to understand or see.

I might try one other change, he said to himself. Before I try cutting the tape. I will prick new punch-holes in the tape and see what presently emerges. It will be interesting because I will not know what the holes I make mean.

Using the tip of a microtool, he punched several holes, at random, on the tape. As close to the scanner as he could manage… he did not want to wait.

"I wonder if you'll see it," he said to Sarah. Apparently not, insofar as he could extrapolate. "Something may show up," he said to her. "I just want to warn you; I don't want you to be afraid."

"Oh dear," Sarah said tinnily.

He examined his wristwatch. One minute passed, then a second, a third.

And then —

In the center of the room appeared a flock of green and black ducks. They quacked excitedly, rose from the floor, fluttered against the ceiling in a dithering mass of feathers and wings and frantic in their vast urge, their instinct, to get away.

“Ducks,” Poole said, marveling. “I punched a hole for a flight of wild ducks.”

Now something else appeared. A park bench with an elderly, tattered man seated on it, reading a torn, bent newspaper. He looked up, dimly made out Poole, smiled briefly at him with badly made dentures, and then returned to his folded-back newspaper. He read on.

“Do you see him?” Poole asked Sarah. “And the ducks.” At that moment the ducks and the park bum disappeared. Nothing remained of them. The interval of their punch-holes had quickly passed.

“They weren’t real,” Sarah said. “Were they? So how —”

“You’re not real,” he told Sarah. “You’re a stimulus-factor on my reality tape. A punch-hole that can be glazed over. Do you also have an existence in another reality tape, or one in an objective reality?” He did not know; he couldn’t tell. Perhaps Sarah did not know, either. Perhaps she existed in a thousand reality tapes; perhaps on every reality tape ever manufactured. “If I cut the tape,” he said, “you will be everywhere and nowhere. Like everything else in the universe. At least as far as I am aware of it.”

Sarah faltered, “I am real.”

“I want to know you completely,” Poole said. “To do that I must cut the tape. If I don’t do it now, I’ll do it some other time; it’s inevitable that eventually I’ll do it.” So why wait? he asked himself. And there is always the possibility that Danceman has reported back to my maker, that they will be making moves to head me off. Because, perhaps, I’m endangering their property — myself.

“You make me wish I had gone to the office after all,” Sarah said, her mouth turned down with dimpled gloom.

“Go,” Poole said.

“I don’t want to leave you alone.”

“I’ll be fine,” Poole said.

“No, you’re not going to be fine. You’re going to unplug yourself or something, kill yourself because you’ve found out you’re just an electric ant and not a human being.”

He said, presently, “Maybe so.” Maybe it boiled down to that.

“And I can’t stop you,” she said.

“No.” He nodded in agreement.

“But I’m going to stay,” Sarah said. “Even if I can’t stop you. Because if I do leave and you do kill yourself, I’ll always ask myself for the rest of my life what would have happened if I had stayed. You see?”

Again he nodded.

“Go ahead,” Sarah said.

He rose to his feet. “It’s not pain I’m going to feel,” he told her. “Although it may look like that to you. Keep in mind the fact that organic robots have minimal pain-circuits in them. I will be experiencing the most intense —”

“Don’t tell me any more,” she broke in. “Just do it if you’re going to, or don’t do it if you’re not.”

Clumsily — because he was frightened — he wriggled his hands into the microglove assembly, reached to pick up a tiny tool: a sharp cutting blade. “I am going to cut a tape mounted inside my chest panel,” he said, as he gazed through the enlarging-lens system. “That’s all.” His hand shook as

it lifted the cutting blade. In a second it can be done, he realized. All over. And — I will have time to fuse the cut ends of the tape back together, he realized. A half hour at least. If I change my mind.

He cut the tape.

Staring at him, cowering, Sarah whispered, “Nothing happened.”

“I have thirty or forty minutes.” He reseated himself at the table, having drawn his hands from the gloves. His voice, he noticed, shook; undoubtedly Sarah was aware of it, and he felt anger at himself, knowing that he had alarmed her. “I’m sorry,” he said, irrationally; he wanted to apologize to her. “Maybe you ought to leave,” he said in panic; again he stood up. So did she, reflexively, as if imitating him; bloated and nervous she stood there palpitating. “Go away,” he said thickly. “Back to the office where you ought to be. Where we both ought to be.” I’m going to fuse the tape-ends together, he told himself; the tension is too great for me to stand.

Reaching his hands toward the gloves he groped to pull them over his straining fingers. Peering into the enlarging screen, he saw the beam from the photoelectric gleam upward, pointed directly into the scanner; at the same time he saw the end of the tape disappearing under the scanner… he saw this, understood it; I’m too late, he realized. It has passed through. God, he thought, help me. It has begun winding at a rate greater than I calculated. So it’s *now* that —

He saw apples, and cobblestones and zebras. He felt warmth, the silky texture of cloth; he felt the ocean lapping at him and a great wind, from the north, plucking at him as if to lead him somewhere. Sarah was all around him, so was Danceman. New York glowed in the night, and the squibs about him scuttled and bounced through night skies and daytime and flooding and drought. Butter relaxed into liquid on his tongue, and at the same time hideous odors and tastes assailed him: the bitter presence of poisons and lemons and blades of summer grass. He drowned; he fell; he lay in the arms of a woman in a vast white bed which at the same time dinned shrilly in his ear: the warning noise of a defective elevator in one of the ancient, ruined downtown hotels. I am living, I have lived, I will never live, he said to himself, and with his thoughts came every word, every

sound; insects squeaked and raced, and he half sank into a complex body of homeostatic machinery located somewhere in Tri-Plan's labs.

He wanted to say something to Sarah. Opening his mouth he tried to bring forth words — a specific string of them out of the enormous mass of them brilliantly lighting his mind, scorching him with their utter meaning.

His mouth burned. He wondered why.

Frozen against the wall, Sarah Benton opened her eyes and saw the curl of smoke ascending from Poole's half-opened mouth. Then the roby sank down, knelt on elbows and knees, then slowly spread out in a broken, crumpled heap. She knew without examining it that it had "died."

Poole did it to itself, she realized. And it couldn't feel pain; it said so itself. Or at least not very much pain; maybe a little. Anyhow, now it is over.

I had better call Mr. Danceman and tell him what's happened, she decided. Still shaky, she made her way across the room to the fone; picking it up, she dialed from memory.

It thought I was a stimulus-factor on its reality tape, she said to herself. So it thought I would die when it "died." How strange, she thought. Why did it imagine that? It had never been plugged into the real world; it had "lived" in an electronic world of its own. How bizarre.

"Mr. Danceman," she said when the circuit to his office had been put through. "Poole is gone. It destroyed itself right in front of my eyes. You'd better come over."

"So we're finally free of it."

"Yes, won't it be nice?"

Danceman said, “I’ll send a couple of men over from the shop.” He saw past her, made out the sight of Poole lying by the kitchen table. “You go home and rest,” he instructed Sarah. “You must be worn out by all this.”

“Yes,” she said. “Thank you, Mr. Danceman.” She hung up and stood, aimlessly.

And then she noticed something.

My hands, she thought. She held them up. Why is it I can see through them?

The walls of the room, too, had become ill-defined.

Trembling, she walked back to the inert roby, stood by it, not knowing what to do. Through her legs the carpet showed, and then the carpet became dim, and she saw, through it, farther layers of disintegrating matter beyond.

Maybe if I can fuse the tape-ends back together, she thought. But she did not know how. And already Poole had become vague.

The wind of early morning blew about her. She did not feel it; she had begun, now, to cease to feel.

The winds blew on.

Cadbury, the Beaver Who Lacked

Once, long ago, before money had been invented, a certain male beaver named Cadbury lived within a meager dam which he had constructed with his own teeth and feet, earning his living by gnawing down shrubs, trees and other growth in exchange for poker chips of several colors. The blue chips he liked best, but they came rarely, generally only due in payment for some uniquely huge gnawing-assignment. In all the passing years of work he had owned only three such chips, but he knew by inference that more must exist, and every now and then during the day's gnawing he paused a moment, fixed a cup of instant coffee, and meditated on chips of all hues, the blues included.

His wife Hilda offered unasked-for advice whenever the opportunity presented itself. "Look at you," she customarily would declare. "You really ought to see a psychiatrist. Your stack of white chips is only approximately half that of Ralf, Peter, Tom, Bob, Jack and Earl, all who live and gnaw around here, because you're so busy woolgathering about your goddam blue chips which you'll never get anyhow because frankly if the blunt truth were known you lack the talent, energy and drive."

"Energy and drive," Cadbury would moodily retort, "mean the same thing." But nevertheless he perceived how right she was. This constituted his wife's main fault: she invariably had truth on her side, whereas he had nothing but hot air. And truth, when pitted against hot air in the arena of life, generally carries the day.

Since Hilda was right, Cadbury dug up eight white chips from his secret chip-concealing place — a shallow depression under a minor rock — and walked two and three-quarters miles to the nearest psychiatrist, a mellow, do-nothing rabbit shaped like a bowling pin who, according to *his* wife, made fifteen thousand a year and so what about it.

“Clever sort of day,” Dr. Drat said amiably, unrolling two Tums for his tummy and leaning back in his extra-heavily padded swivel chair.

“Not so very darn clever,” Cadbury answered, “when you know you don’t have it in you ever to catch sight of a blue chip again, even though you work your ass off day in and day out, and what for? She spends it faster than I make it. Even if I did get my teeth in a blue chip it’d be gone overnight for something expensive and useless on the installment plan, such as for instance a twelve million candle-power self-recharging flashlight. With a lifetime guarantee.”

“Those are darn clever,” Dr. Drat said, “those what you said there, those self-recharging flashlights.”

“The only reason I came to you,” Cadbury said, “is because my wife made me. She can get me to do anything. If she said, ‘Swim out into the middle of the creek and drown,’ do you know what I’d do?”

“You’d rebel,” Dr. Drat said in his amiable voice, his hoppers up on the surface of his burled walnut desk.

“I’d kick in her fucking face,” Cadbury said. “I’d gnaw her to bits; I’d gnaw her right in half, right through the middle. You’re damn right. I mean, I’m not kidding; it’s a fact. I hate her.”

“How much,” Dr. Drat asked, “is your wife like your mother?”

“I never had a mother,” Cadbury said in a grumpy way — a way which he adopted from time to time: a regular characteristic with him, as Hilda had pointed out. “I was found floating in the Napa Slough in a shoebox with a handwritten note reading ‘FINDERS KEEPERS.’ “

“What was your last dream?” Dr. Drat inquired.

“My last dream,” Cadbury said, “is — was — the same as all the others. I always dream I buy a two-cent mint at the drugstore, one of the flat chocolate-covered mints wrapped in green foil, and when I remove the foil it isn’t a mint. You know what it is?”

“Suppose you tell me what it is,” Dr. Drat said, in a voice suggesting that he really knew but no one was paying him to say it.

Cadbury said fiercely, “It’s a blue chip. Or rather it *looks* like a blue chip. It’s blue and it’s flat and round and the same size. But in the dream I always say ‘Maybe it’s just a blue mint.’ I mean, there must be such a thing as blue mints. I’d hate like to hell to store it in my secret chip-concealing place — a shallow depression under an ordinary-looking rock — and then there’d be this hot day, see, and afterwards when I went to get my blue chip — or rather *supposed* blue chip — I found it all melted because it really was a mint after all and not a blue chip. And who’d I sue? The manufacturer? Christ; he never claimed it was a blue chip; it clearly said, in my dream, on the green foil wrapper —”

“I think,” Dr. Drat broke in mildly, “that our time is up for today. We might well do some exploring of this aspect of your inner psyche next week because it appears to be leading us somewhere.”

Rising to his feet, Cadbury said, “What’s the matter with me, Dr. Drat? I want an answer; be frank — I can take it. Am I psychotic?”

“Well, you have illusions,” Dr. Drat said, after a meditative pause. “No, you’re not psychotic; you don’t hear the voice of Christ or anything like that telling you to go out and rape people. No, it’s illusions. About yourself, your work, your wife. There may be more. Goodbye.” He rose, too, hippity-hopped to the door of his office and politely but firmly opened it, exposing the tunnel out.

For some reason Cadbury felt cheated; he felt that he had only just begun to talk, and here it was, time to go. “I bet,” he said, “you headshrinkers make a hell of a lot of blue chips. I should have gone to

college and become a psychiatrist and then I wouldn’t have any problems any more. Except for Hilda; I guess I’d still have her.”

Since Dr. Drat had nothing by way of comment to that, Cadbury moodily walked the four miles back north to his current gnawing-assignment, a large poplar growing at the edge of Papermill Creek, and sank his teeth furiously into the base of the poplar, imagining to himself that the tree was a syzygy of Dr. Drat and Hilda both together.

At almost precisely that moment a nattily-attired fowl came soaring through the grove of cypress trees nearby and alit on a branch of the swaying, being-gnawed-on poplar. “Your mail for today,” the fowl informed him, and dropped a letter which sailed to the ground at Cadbury’s rear feet. “Air mail, too. Looks interesting. I held it up to the light and it’s handwritten, not typed. Looks like a woman’s hand.”

With his gnawing tooth, Cadbury ripped the envelope open. Sure enough, the mail bird had perceived accurately: here was a handwritten letter clearly the product of the mind of some unknown woman. The letter, very short, consisted of this:

Dear Mr. Cadbury,

I love you.

Cordially, and hoping for a reply,

Jane Feckless Foundfully.

Never in his life had Cadbury heard of such a person. He turned the letter over, saw no more writing, sniffed, smelling — or imagined that he smelled — a faint, subtle, smoky perfume. However, on the back of the envelope he located further words in Jane Feckless Foundfully’s (was she Miss or Mrs.?) hand: her return address.

This excited his senses no end.

“Was I right?” the mail bird asked, from its branch above him.

“No, it’s a bill,” Cadbury lied. “Made to look like a personal letter.” He then pretended to return to his work of gnawing, and after a pause the mail bird, deceived, flapped off and disappeared.

At once Cadbury ceased gnawing, seated himself on a rise of turf, got out his turtle-shell snuff box, took a deep, thoughtful pinch of his preferred mixture, Mrs. Siddon’s No. 3 & 4, and contemplated in the most profound and keen manner possible whether (a) he ought to reply to Jane Feckless Foundfully’s letter at all or simply forget that he had ever received it, or (b) answer it, and if (b) then answer it (b sub one) in a bantering fashion or (b sub two) with possibly a meaningful poem from his Undermeyer’s anthology of World Poetry plus several suggestive-of-a-sensitive-nature added notations of his own invention, or possibly even (b sub three) come right out and say something such as:

Dear Miss (Mrs.?) Foundfully,

In answer to your letter, the fact is that I love you, too, and am unhappy in my marital relationship with a woman I do not now and actually never really did love, and also am quite dispirited and pessimistic and dissatisfied by my employment and am consulting Dr. Drat, who in all honesty doesn’t seem able to help me a bit, although in all probability it’s not his fault but rather due to the severity of my emotional disturbance. Perhaps you and I could get together in the near future and discuss both your situation and mine, and make some progress.

Cordially,

Bob Cadbury (call me Bob, okay? And I’ll call you Jane, if that’s okay).

The problem, however, he realized, consisted in the obvious fact that Hilda would get wind of this and do something dreadful — he had no idea what, only a recognition, melancholy indeed, of its severity. And in addition — but second in order as a problem — how did he know he would like or love, whichever, Miss (or Mrs.) Foundfully in return? Obviously she either knew him directly in some manner which he could not account for or had

perhaps heard about him through a mutual friend; in any case she seemed certain of her own emotions and intentions toward him, and that mainly was what mattered.

The situation depressed him. Because how could he tell if this was a way out of his misery or on the contrary a worsening of that same misery in a new direction?

Still seated and taking pinch after pinch of snuff, he pondered many alternatives, including doing away with himself, which seemed in accord with the dramatic nature of Miss Foundfully's letter.

That night, after he arrived home weary and discouraged from his gnawing, had eaten dinner and then retired into his locked study away from Hilda where she probably did not know what he was up to, he got out his Hermes portable typewriter, inserted a page, reflected long and soul-searchingly, and then wrote an answer to Miss Foundfully.

While he lay supine, engrossed in this task, his wife Hilda burst into his locked study. Bits of lock, door and hinges, as well as several screws, flew in all directions.

"What are you doing?" Hilda demanded. "All hunched over your Hermes typewriter like some sort of bug. You look like a horrid little dried-up spider, the way you always do this time of evening."

"I'm writing to the main branch of the library," Cadbury said, in icy dignity, "about a book I returned which they claim I didn't."

"You liar," his wife Hilda said in a frenzy of rage, having now looked over his shoulder and seen the beginning part of his letter. "Who is this Miss Foundfully? Why are you writing her?"

"Miss Foundfully," Cadbury said artfully, "is the librarian who has been assigned to my case."

“Well, I happen to know you’re lying,” his wife said. “Because /wrote that perfumed fake letter to you to test you. And I was right. You *are* answering it; I knew it the minute I heard you begin peck-pecking away at the disgusting cheap common typewriter you love so dearly.” She then snatched up the typewriter, letter and all, and hurled it through the window of Cadbury’s study, into the night darkness.

“My assumption, then,” Cadbury managed to say after a time, “is that there is no Miss Foundfully, so there is no point in my getting the flashlight and looking around outside for my Hermes - if it still exists - to finish the letter. Am I correct?”

With a jeering expression, but without lowering herself by answering, his wife stalked from his study, leaving him alone with his assumptions and his tin of Boswell’s Best, a snuff mixture far too mild for such an occasion.

Well, Cadbury thought to himself, I guess then I’ll never be able to get away from Hilda. And he thought, I wonder what Miss Foundfully would have been like had she really existed. And then he thought, Maybe even though my wife made her up there might be somewhere in the world a real person who would be like I imagine Miss Foundfully — or rather like I imagined before I found out — to be. If you follow me, he thought to himself broodingly. I mean, my wife Hilda can’t be *all* the Miss Foundfullys in the entire world.

The next day at work, alone with the half-gnawed poplar tree, he produced a small note-pad and short pencil, envelope and stamp which he had managed to smuggle out of the house without Hilda noticing. Seated on a slight rise of earth, snuffing meditatively small pinches of Bezoar Fine Grind, he wrote a short note, printed so as to be easily read.

TO WHOMEVER READS THIS!

My name is Bob Cadbury and I am a young, fairly healthy beaver with a broad background in political science and theology, although largely self-taught, and I would like to talk with you about God and The Purpose of Existence and other topics of like ilk. Or we could play chess.

Cordially,

And he thereupon signed his name. For a time he pondered, sniffed an extra large pinch of Bezoar Fine Grind, and then he added:

P.S. Are you a girl? If you are I'll bet you're pretty.

Folding the note up he placed it in a nearly-empty snuff tin, sealed the tin painstakingly with Scotch Tape, and then floated it off down the creek in a direction which he calculated to be somewhat northwest.

Several days passed before he saw, with excitement and glee, a second snuff tin — not the one which he had launched — slowly floating up the creek in a direction which he calculated as southeast.

Dear Mr. Cadbury *(the folded-up note within the snuff tin began).* My sister and brother are the only non-fud friends I have, and if you're not a fud, the way everyone has been since I got back from Madrid, I'd sure like to meet you. meet you.

There was also a P.S.

P.S. You sound real keen and neat and I'll bet you know a lot about Zen Buddhism.

The letter was signed in a way difficult to read, but at last he made it out as Carol Stickyfoot.

He at once dispatched this note in answer:

Dear Miss (Mrs.?) Stickyfoot,

Are you real or are you somebody made up by my wife? It is essential that I know at once, as I have in the past been tricked and now have to be constantly wary.

Off went the note, floating within its snuff tin in a northwest direction. The answer, when it arrived the following day floating in a southeast direction in a Cameleopard No. 5 snuff tin, read briefly:

Mr. Cadbury, if you think I am a figment of your wife's distorted mind, then you are going to miss out on life.

Very truly yours,

Carol

Well, that's certainly sound advice, Cadbury said to himself as he read and reread the letter. On the other hand, he said to himself, this is almost precisely what I would expect a figment of my wife Hilda's distorted mind to come up with. So what is proved?

Dear Miss Stickyfoot *(he wrote back)*,

I love you and believe in you. But just to be on the safe side — from my point of view, I mean — could you remit under separate cover — C.O.D. if you wish — some item or object or artifact which would prove beyond a reasonable doubt who and what you are, if that's not asking too much. Try and understand my position. I dare not make a second mistake such as in the Foundfully disaster. This time I would go out the window along with the Hermes.

With adoration, *etc.*

This he floated off in a northwest direction, and at once set about waiting for a reply. Meanwhile, however, he had to visit Dr. Drat once more. Hilda insisted on it.

"And how's it been going, down by the creek?" Dr. Drat said in a jovial manner, his big fuzzy hoppers up on his desk.

The decision to be frank and honest with the psychiatrist stole over Cadbury. Surely there lay no harm in telling Drat everything; this was what he was being paid for: to hear the truth with all its details, both horrid and sublime.

"I've fallen in love with Carol Stickyfoot," he began. "But at the same time, although my love is absolute and eternal, I have this nagging angst that she's a figment of my wife's deranged imagination, concocted as was Miss Foundfully to lead me into revealing my true self to Hilda, which at all costs I need to conceal. Because if my true self came out I'd knock the frigging crap out of her and leave her flat."

"Hmm," Dr. Drat said.

"And out of you, too," Cadbury said, releasing all his hostilities in one grand basketful.

Dr. Drat said, "You trust no one, then? You're alienated from all mankind? You've lead a life-pattern that's drawn you insidiously into total isolation? Think before you answer; the answer may be yes, and this you may have trouble facing."

"I'm not isolated from Carol Stickyfoot," Cadbury said hotly. "In fact that's the whole point; I'm trying to terminate my isolation. When I was preoccupied with blue chips *then* I was isolated. Meeting and getting to know Miss Stickyfoot may mean the end of all that's wrong in my life, and if you have any insight into me you'd be damn glad I floated off that snuff tin that day. Damn glad." He glowered moodily at the long-eared doctor.

"It may interest you to know," Dr. Drat said, "that Miss Stickyfoot is a former patient of mine. She cracked up in Madrid and had to be flown back here in a suitcase. I'll admit she's quite attractive, but she's got a lot of emotional problems. And her left breast is larger than her right."

"But you admit she's real!" Cadbury shouted in excited discovery.

“Oh, she’s *real* enough; I’ll grant that. But you may find you have your hands full. After a while you may wish you were back with Hilda again. God only knows where Carol Stickyfoot may lead the two of you. I doubt if Carol herself knows.”

It sounded pretty damn good to Cadbury, and he returned to his virtually gnawed-through poplar tree at the creek bank in high spirits. The time, according to his waterproof Rolex watch, came to only ten-thirty, and so he had more or less the entire day to plan out what he should do, now that he knew that Carol Stickyfoot really existed and was not merely another snare and delusion manufactured by his wife.

Several regions of the creek remained unmapped, and, because of the nature of his employment, he knew these places intimately. Six or seven hours lay ahead before he had to report home to Hilda; why not abandon the poplar project temporarily and begin hasty construction of an adequate little concealed shelter for himself and Carol, beyond the ability of the world at large to identify, locate or recognize? It had become action time; thinking time had passed.

Toward the latter part of the day, while he labored deeply engrossed in erecting the adequate little concealed shelter, a tin of Dean’s Own came floating southeast down the creek. In a boiling wake of paddled water he rushed out to seize the snuff tin before it drifted by.

When he had removed the Scotch Tape and opened it he found a small package wrapped in tissue paper and a derisive note.

Here’s your proof *(the note read).*

The package contained three blue chips.

For over an hour Cadbury could scarcely trust his teeth to gnaw properly, so great was the shock of Carol’s token of authenticity, her pledge to him and all that he represented. In near madness he bit through branch

after branch of an old oak tree, scattering boughs in every direction. A strange frenzy overcame him. He had actually found someone, had managed to escape Hilda — the road lay ahead and he had only to travel it… or rather swim it.

Tying several empty snuff tins together with a length of twine he pushed off into the creek; the tins floated more or less northwest and Cadbury paddled after them, breathing heavily with anticipation. As he paddled, keeping the snuff tins perpetually in view, he composed a rhymed quatrain for the occasion of meeting Carol face to face.

There’s few who say I love you.

But this, I swear, is truth:

The deed which I have sought to

Is sure and sound and sooth.

He did not know exactly what “sooth” meant, but how many words rhymed with “truth”?

Meanwhile, the tied-together snuff tins led him nearer and nearer — or so he hoped and believed — to Miss Carol Stickyfoot. Bliss. But then, as he paddled along, he got to recalling the sly, carefully-casual remarks of Dr. Drat, the seeds of uncertainty planted in Drat’s professional fashion. Did he (meaning himself, not Drat) have the courage, the power and integrity, the dedication of purpose, to cope with Carol if she had, as Drat declared, severe emotional problems? Suppose Drat turned out to be correct? Suppose Carol proved to be more difficult and destructive than even Hilda — who threw his Hermes portable typewriter through the window and suchlike manifestations of psychopathic rage?

Busy ruminating, he failed to notice that the several tied-together snuff tins had coasted silently to shore. Reflexively, he paddled after them and up out of the creek onto land.

Ahead — a modest apartment with handpainted window shades and a nonobjective mobile swinging lazily above the door. And there, on the front porch, sat Carol Stickyfoot, drying her hair with a large white fluffy towel.

"I love you," Cadbury said. He shook the creek-water from his pelt and fidgeted about in a dither of suppressed affect.

Glancing up, Carol Stickyfoot appraised him. She had lovely huge dark eyes and long heavy hair which shone in the fading sun. "I hope you brought the three blue chips back," she said. "Because, see, I borrowed them from the place I work and I have to return them." She added, "It was a gesture because you seemed to need assurance. The fuds have been getting to you, like that headshrinker Drat. He's a real fud of the worst sort. Would you like a cup of instant Yuban coffee?"

As he followed her into her modest apartment Cadbury said, "I guess you heard my opening remark. I have never been more serious in my whole life. I really do love you, and in the most serious manner. I'm not looking for something trivial or casual or temporary; I'm looking for the most durable and serious kind of relationship there is. I hope in God's name you're not just playing, because I never felt more serious and tense about anything in my life, even including blue chips. If this is just a way of amusing yourself or some such thing it would be merciful for you to end it now by plainly speaking out. Because the torture of leaving my wife and beginning a new life and then finding out —"

"Did Dr. Fud tell you I paint?" Carol Stickyfoot asked as she put a pan of water on the stove in her modest kitchen and lit the burner under it with an old-fashioned large wooden match.

"He told me only that you flipped your cork in Madrid," Cadbury said. He seated himself at the small wooden unpainted pine table opposite the stove and watched with love in his heart Miss Stickyfoot spooning instant coffee into two ceramic mugs which had pataphysical spirals baked into their glaze.

“*Do* you know anything about Zen?” Miss Stickyfoot asked.

“Only that you ask koans which are sort of riddles,” he said. “And you give a sort of nonsense answer because the question is really idiotic in the first place, such as Why are we here on earth? and so forth.” He hoped he had put it properly and she would think that he really did know something about Zen, as mentioned in her letter. And then he thought of a very good Zen answer to her question. “Zen,” he said, “is a complete philosophic system which contains questions for every answer that exists in the universe. For instance, if you have the answer ‘Yes,’ then Zen is capable of propounding the exact query which is linked to it, such as ‘Must we die in order to please the Creator, who likes his creations to perish?’ Although actually, now that I think about it more deeply, the question which Zen would say goes with that answer is ‘Are we here in this kitchen about to drink instant Yuban coffee?’ Would you agree?” When she did not answer immediately, Cadbury said hurriedly, “In fact Zen would say that the answer ‘Yes’ is the answer to that question: ‘Would you agree?’ There you have one of the great values of Zen; it can propound a variety of exact questions for almost any given answer.”

“You’re full of shit,” Miss Stickyfoot said disdainfully.

Cadbury said, “That proves I understand Zen. Do you see? Or perhaps the fact is that you don’t actually understand Zen yourself.” He felt a trifle nettled.

“Maybe you’re right,” Miss Stickyfoot said. “I mean about my not understanding Zen. The fact is I don’t understand it at all.”

“That’s very Zen,” Cadbury pointed out. “And I do. Which is also Zen. Do you see?”

“Here’s your coffee,” Miss Stickyfoot said; she placed the two full, steaming cups of coffee on the table and seated herself across from him. Then she smiled. It seemed to him a nice smile, full of light and gentleness, a funny little wrinkled shy smile, with a puzzled, questioning glow of

wonder and concern in her eyes. They really were beautiful large dark eyes, just about the most beautiful he had ever seen in his entire life, and he in all truthfulness was in love with her; he had not merely been saying that.

"You realize I'm married," he said as he sipped his coffee. "But I'm separated from her. I've been constructing this hovel down along a part of the creek where no one ever goes. I say 'hovel' so as not to give you a false impression that it's a mansion or anything; actually it's very well put-together. I'm an expert artisan in my field. I'm not trying to impress you; this is simply God's truth. I know I can take care of both our needs. Or we can live here." He looked around Miss Stickyfoot's modest apartment. How ascetically and tastefully she had arranged it. He liked it here; he felt peace come to him, a dwindling away of his tensions. For the first time in years.

"You have an odd aura," Miss Stickyfoot said. "Sort of soft and woolly and purple. I approve of it. But I've never seen one like it before. Do you build model trains? It sort of looks like the kind of aura that someone who builds model trains would have."

"I can build almost anything," Cadbury said. "With my teeth, my hands, my words. Listen; this is for you." He then recited his four-line poem. Miss Stickyfoot listened intently.

"That poem," she decided, when he had finished, "has wu. 'Wu' is a Japanese term — or is it Chinese? — meaning you know what." She gestured irritably. "Simplicity. Like some of Paul Klee's drawings." But then she added, "It's not very good, though. Otherwise."

"I composed it," he explained testily, "while paddling down the creek after my tied-together snuff tins. It was strictly spur-of-the-moment stuff; I can do better seated in isolation in my locked study at my Hermes. If Hilda isn't banging at the door. You can discern why I hate her. Because of her sadistic intrusions the only time I have for creative work is while paddling or eating my lunch. That one aspect alone of my marital life explains why I had to break away from it and seek you out. In relationship to a person of

your sort I could create on a totally new level entirely. I'd have blue chips coming out my ears. In addition, I wouldn't have to spend myself into oblivion seeing Dr. Drat whom you correctly call a number one fud."

" 'Blue chips,' " Miss Stickyfoot echoed, screwing up her face with distaste. "Is that the level you mean? It seems to me you have the aspirations of a wholesale dried fruit dealer. Forget blue chips; don't leave your wife because of that: you're only carrying your old value-system with you. You've internalized what she's taught you, except that you're carrying it one step farther. Pursue a different course entirely and all will go well with you."

"Like Zen?" he asked.

"You only play with Zen. If you really understood it you never would have answered my note by coming here. There is no perfect person in the world, for you or anybody else. I can't make you feel any better than you do with your wife; you carry your troubles inside you."

"I agree with that up to a point," Cadbury agreed, up to a point. "But my wife makes them worse. Maybe with you they wouldn't entirely go away, but they wouldn't be so bad. *Nothing* could be so bad as it is now. At least you wouldn't throw my Hermes typewriter out the window whenever you got mad at me, and in addition maybe you wouldn't get mad at me every goddam minute of the day and night, as she does. Had you thought about that? Put that in your pipe and smoke it, as the expression goes."

His reasoning did not seem to go unnoticed by Miss Stickyfoot; she nodded in what appeared to be at least partial agreement. "All right," she said after a pause, and her large dark attractive eyes gleamed with sudden light. "Let's make the effort. If you can abandon your obsessive chatter for a moment — for perhaps the first time in your life — I'll do with you and for you, which you could never have done by yourself, what needs to be done. All right? Shall I lay it on you?"

“You have begun to articulate oddly,” Cadbury said, with a mixture of alarm, surprise — and a growing awe. Miss Stickyfoot, before his eyes, had begun to change in a palpable fashion. What had, up to now, appeared to him the ultimate in beauty evolved as he gazed fixedly; beauty, as he had known it, anticipated it, imagined it, dissolved and was carried away into the rivers of oblivion, of the past, of the limitations of his own mind: it was replaced, now, by something further, something that surpassed it, which he could never have conjured up from his own imagination. It far exceeded that.

Miss Stickyfoot had become several persons, each of them bound to the nature of reality, pretty but not illusive, attractive but within the confines of actuality. And these people, he saw, meant much more, were much more, because they were not manifestations fulfilling his wishes, products of his own mind. One, a semi-Oriental girl with long, shiny, dark hair, gazed at him with impassive, bright, intelligent eyes that sparkled with calm awareness; the perception of him, within them, lucid and correct, unimpaired by sentiment or even kindness, mercy or compassion — yet her eyes held one kind of love: justice, without aversion or repudiation of him, as conscious as she was of his imperfections. It was a comradely love, a sharing of her cerebral, analytical evaluation of himself and of her own self, and the bonded-togetherness of the two of them by their mutual failings.

The next girl, smiling with forgiveness and tolerance, unaware of him as falling short in any way — nothing he was or was not or could do or fail to do would disappoint her or lower her esteem for him — glowed and smouldered darkly, with a kind of warm, sad, and at the same time eternally cheerful happiness: this, his mother, his eternal, never-disappearing, never going-away or leaving or forgetting mother who would never withdraw her protection of him, her sheltering cloak that concealed him, warmed him, breathed hope and the flicker of new life into him when pain and defeat and loneliness chilled him into near-ashes… the first girl, his equal: his sister, perhaps; this girl his gentle, strong mother who was at the same time frail and afraid but not showing either.

And, with them, a peevish, pouting, irritable girl, immature, pretty in a marred way, with certain skin blemishes, wearing a too-frilly, too-satinish

blouse, too-short skirt, with legs too thin; yet still attractive in an undeveloped way. She gazed at him with disappointment, as if he had let her down, had failed her, always would; and still she glared at him demandingly, still wanting more, still trying to call forth from him everything she needed and yearned for: the whole world, the sky, everything, but despising him because he could not give it to her. This, he realized, his future daughter, who would turn from him finally, as the two others would not, would desert him in resentful disappointment to seek fulfillment in another, younger man. He would have her only a short time. And he would never fully please her.

But all three loved him, and all three were his girls, his women, his wistful, hopeful, sad, frightened, trusting, suffering, laughing, sensual, protecting, warming, demanding female realities, his trinity of the objective world standing in opposition to him and at the same time completing him, adding to him what he was not and never would be, what he cherished and prized and respected and loved and needed more than anything else in existence. Miss Stickyfoot, as such, was gone. These three girls stood in her place. And they did not communicate to him remotely, across a break, by floating messages down Papermill Creek in empty snuff tins; they spoke directly, their intense eyes fixed on him unrelentingly, ceaselessly aware of him.

“I will live with you,” the calm-eyed Asianish girl said. “As a neutral companion, off and on, as long as I’m alive and you’re alive, which may not be forever. Life is transitory and often not worth being fucked over by. Sometimes I think the dead are better off. Maybe I’ll join them today, maybe tomorrow. Maybe I’ll kill you, send you to join them, or take you with me. Want to come? You can pay the travel-expenses, at least if you want me to accompany you. Otherwise I’ll go by myself and travel free on a military transport 707; I get a regular government rebate the rest of my life, which I put in a secret bank account for semi-legal investment purposes of an undisclosed nature for purposes you better God damn never find out if you know what’s best for you.” She paused, still eyeing him impassively. “Well?”

“What was the question?” Cadbury said, lost.

“I said,” she said fiercely, with impatient dismissal of his low mental powers, “I’ll live with you for an unspecified period, with uncertain ultimate outcome, if you’ll pay enough, and especially — and this is mandatory — if you keep the house functioning efficiently — you know, pay bills, clean up, shop, fix meals — in such a way that I’m not bothered. So I can do my own things, which matter.”

“Okay,” he said eagerly.

“I’ll never live with you,” the sad-eyed, warm, smoky-haired girl said, plump and pliant in her cuddly leather jacket with its tassles, and her brown cord slacks and boots, carrying her rabbit-skin purse. “But I’ll look in on you now and then on my way to work in the morning and see if you’ve got a joint you can lay on me, and if you don’t, and you’re down, I’ll supercharge you — but not right now. Okay?” She smiled even more intensely, her lovely eyes rich with wisdom and the unstated complexity of herself and her love.

“Sure,” he said. He wished for more, but knew that was all; she did not belong to him, did not exist for him: she was herself, and a product of and piece of the world.

“Rape,” the third girl said, her overred, too-lush lips twisting with malice, but at the same time twitching with amusement. “I’ll never leave you, you dirty old man, because when I do, how the hell are you ever going to find anyone else willing to live with a child molester who’s going to die of a coronary embolism or massive infarct any day now? After I’m gone it’s all over for you, you dirty old man.” Suddenly, briefly, her eyes moisted over with grief and compassion — but only briefly and then it was over. “That will be the only happiness you’ll ever have. So I can’t go; I have to stay with you and delay my own life, even if it’s forever.” She lost, then, by degrees, her animation; a kind of resigned, mechanical, inert blackness settled over her garish, immature, attractive features. “If I get a better offer,

though," she said stonily, "I'll take it. I'll have to shop around and see. Check out the action downtown."

"The hell you say," Cadbury said, hotly, with resentment. And experienced already, a dreadful sense of loss, as if she had gone away even now, even this soon; it had already happened — this, the worst thing possible in all his life.

"Now," all three girls said at once, briskly, "let's get down to the nitty-gritty. How many blue token chips do you have?"

"W-what?" Cadbury stammered, startled.

"That's the name of the game," the three girls chimed in unison, with bright-eyed asperity. All their combined faculties had been roused to existence by the topic; they were individually and collectively fully alert. "Let's see your checkbook. What's your balance?"

"What's your Gross Annual Product?" the Asian girl said. "I would never rip you off," the warm sentimental, patient, cherishing girl said, "but could you lend me two blue chips? I know you've got hundreds, an important and famous beaver like you."

"Go get some and buy me two quarts of chocolate milk and a carton of various assorted donuts and a Coke at the Speedy Mart," the peevish girl said. "Can I borrow your Porsche?" the cherishing girl asked. "If I put gas in it?"

"But you can't drive mine," the Asian girl said. "It'd increase the cost of my insurance, which my mother pays."

"Teach me how to drive," the peevish girl said, "so I can get one of my boyfriends to take me to the motor movies tomorrow night; it's only two bucks a carload. They're showing five skinflicks, and we can get a couple of dudes and a chick into the trunk."

“Better entrust your blue chips to my keeping,” the cherishing girl said. “These other chicks’ll rip you off.”

“Fuck you,” the peevish girl said roughly.

“If you listen to her or give her one single blue chip,” the Asian girl said fiercely, “I’ll tear out your fucking heart and eat it alive. And that low-class one, she’s got the clap; if you sleep with her you’ll be sterile the rest of your life.”

“I don’t have any blue chips,” Cadbury said anxiously, fearing that, knowing this, all three girls would depart. “But I —”

“Sell your Hermes Rocket typewriter,” the Asian girl said.

“I’ll sell it for you,” the cherishing, protective girl said in her gentle voice. “And give you —” She calculated, painstakingly, slowly, with effort. “I’ll split it with you. Fairly. I’d never burn you.” She smiled at him, and he knew it was true.

“My mother owns an electric IBM space-expander, ball-type office model,” the peevish girl said haughtily, with near-contempt. “I’d get myself one and learn to type and get a good job, except that I get more by staying on welfare.”

“Later in the year —” Cadbury began desperately.

“We’ll see you later,” the three girls who had formerly been Miss Stickyfoot, said. “Or you can mail the blue chips to us. Okay?” They began to recede, collectively; they wavered and became insubstantial. Or —

Was it Cadbury himself, the Beaver Who Lacked, who was becoming insubstantial? He had a sudden, despairing intuition that it was the latter. *He* was fading out; they remained. And yet that was good.

He could survive that. He could survive his own disappearance. But not theirs.

Already, in the short time he had known them, they meant more to him than he did to himself. And that was a relief.

Whether he had any blue chips for them or not — and that seemed to be what mattered to them — they would survive. If they could not coax, rip-off, borrow, or anyhow in one fashion or another get blue chips from him, they'd get them from somebody else. Or else go along happily anyhow without them. They did not really need them; they *liked* them. They could survive with or without them. But they, frankly, were not really interested in survival. They wanted to be, intended to be, and knew how to be, genuinely happy. They would not settle for mere survival; they wanted to live.

"I hope I see you again," Cadbury said. "Or rather, I hope you see me again. I mean, I hope I reappear, at least briefly, from time to time, in your lives. Just so I can see how you're doing."

"Stop scheming on us," all three said in unison, as Cadbury became virtually nonexistent; all that remained of him, now, was a wisp of gray smoke, lingering plaintively in the half-exhausted air that had once offered to sustain him.

"You'll be back," the cherishing, plump, leather-clad, warm-eyed girl said, with certitude, as if she knew instinctively that there could be no doubt. "We'll see you."

"I hope so," Cadbury said, but now even the sound of his gone-off voice had become faint; it flickered like a fading audio signal from some distant star that had, long ago, cooled into ash and darkness and inertness and silence.

"Let's go to the beach," the Asian girl said as the three of them strolled away, confident and assured and substantial and alive to the activity of the day. And off they went.

Cadbury — or at least the ions that remained of him as a sort of vapor trail marking his one-time passage through life and out — wondered if there were, at their beach, any nice trees to gnaw. And where their beach was. And if it was nice. And if it had a name.

Pausing briefly, glancing back, the compassionate, cherishing plump girl in leather and soft tassles said, “Would you like to come along? We could take you for a little while, maybe this one time. But not again. You know how it is.”

There was no answer.

“I love you,” she said softly, to herself. And smiled her moist-eyed, happy, sorrowful, understanding, remembering smile.

And went on. A little behind the other two. Lingering slightly, as if, without showing it, looking back.

A Little Something for Us Tempunauts

Wearily, Addison Doug plodded up the long path of synthetic redwood rounds, step by step, his head down a little, moving as if he were in actual physical pain. The girl watched him, wanting to help him, hurt within her to see how worn and unhappy he was, but at the same time she rejoiced that he was there at all. On and on, toward her, without glancing up, going by feel… like he's done this many times, she thought suddenly. Knows the way too well. Why?

"Addi," she called, and ran toward him. "They said on the TV you were dead. All of you were killed!"

He paused, wiping back his dark hair, which was no longer long; just before the launch they had cropped it. But he had evidently forgotten. "You believe everything you see on TV?" he said, and came on again, haltingly, but smiling now. And reaching up for her.

God, it felt good to hold him, and to have him clutch at her again, with more strength than she had expected. "I was going to find somebody else," she gasped. "To replace you."

"I'll knock your head off if you do," he said. "Anyhow, that isn't possible; nobody could replace me."

"But what about the implosion?" she said. "On reentry; they said —"

"I forget," Addison said, in the tone he used when he meant, I'm not going to discuss it. The tone had always angered her before, but not now. This time she sensed how awful the memory was. "I'm going to stay at your place a couple of days," he said, as together they moved up the path toward the open front door of the tilted A-frame house. "If that's okay. And Benz

and Crayne will be joining me, later on; maybe even as soon as tonight. We've got a lot to talk over and figure out."

"Then all three of you survived." She gazed up into his careworn face. "Everything they said on TV…" She understood, then. Or believed she did. "It was a cover story. For — political purposes, to fool the Russians. Right? I mean, the Soviet Union'll think the launch was a failure because on reentry —"

"No," he said. "A chrononaut will be joining us, most likely. To help figure out what happened. General Toad said one of them is already on his way here; they got clearance already. Because of the gravity of the situation."

"Jesus," the girl said, stricken. "Then who's the cover story for?"

"Let's have something to drink," Addison said. "And then I'll outline it all for you."

"Only thing I've got at the moment is California brandy."

Addison Doug said, "I'd drink anything right now, the way I feel." He dropped to the couch, leaned back, and sighed a ragged, distressed sigh, as the girl hurriedly began fixing both of them a drink.

The FM-radio in the car yammered, "… grieves at the stricken turn of events precipitating out of an unheralded…"

"Official nonsense babble," Crayne said, shutting off the radio. He and Benz were having trouble finding the house, having been there only once before. It struck Crayne that this was somewhat informal a way of convening a conference of this importance, meeting at Addison's chick's pad out here in the boondocks of Ojai. On the other hand, they wouldn't be pestered by the curious. And they probably didn't have much time. But that was hard to say; about that no one knew for sure.

The hills on both sides of the road had once been forests, Crayne observed. Now housing tracts and their melted, irregular, plastic roads marred every rise in sight. “I’ll bet this was nice once,” he said to Benz, who was driving.

“The Los Padres National Forest is near here,” Benz said. “I got lost in there when I was eight. For hours I was sure a rattler would get me. Every stick was a snake.”

“The rattler’s got you now,” Crayne said.

“All of us,” Benz said.

“You know,” Crayne said, “it’s a hell of an experience to be dead.”

“Speak for yourself.”

“But technically —”

“If you listen to the radio and TV.” Benz turned toward him, his big gnome face bleak with admonishing sternness. “We’re no more dead than anyone else on the planet. The difference for us is that our death date is in the past, whereas everyone else’s is set somewhere at an uncertain time in the future. Actually, some people have it pretty damn well set, like people in cancer wards; they’re as certain as we are. More so. For example, how long can we stay here before we go back? We have a margin, a latitude that a terminal cancer victim doesn’t have.”

Crayne said cheerfully, “The next thing you’ll be telling us to cheer us up is that we’re in no pain.”

“Addi is. I watched him lurch off earlier today. He’s got it psychosomatically — made it into a physical complaint. Like God’s kneeling on his neck; you know, carrying a much-too-great burden that’s

unfair, only he won't complain out loud… just points now and then at the nail hole in his hand." He grinned.

"Addi has got more to live for than we do."

"Every man has more to live for than any other man. I don't have a cute chick to sleep with, but I'd like to see the semis rolling along Riverside Freeway at sunset a few more times. It's not what you have to live for; it's that you want to live to see it, to be there — that's what is so damn sad."

They rode on in silence.

In the quiet living room of the girl's house the three tempunauts sat around smoking, taking it easy; Addison Doug thought to himself that the girl looked unusually foxy and desirable in her stretched-tight white sweater and micro-skirt and he wished, wistfully, that she looked a little less interesting. He could not really afford to get embroiled in such stuff, at this point. He was too tired.

"Does she know," Benz said, indicating the girl, "what this is all about? I mean, can we talk openly? It won't wipe her out?"

"I haven't explained it to her yet," Addison said.

"You goddam well better," Crayne said.

"What is it?" the girl said, stricken, sitting upright with one hand directly between her breasts. As if clutching at a religious artifact that isn't there, Addison thought.

"We got snuffed on reentry," Benz said. He was, really, the crudest of the three. Or at least the most blunt. "You see, Miss…"

"Hawkins," the girl whispered.

“Glad to meet you, Miss Hawkins.” Benz surveyed her in his cold, lazy fashion. “You have a first name?”

“Merry Lou.”

“Okay, Merry Lou,” Benz said. To the other two men he observed, “Sounds like the name a waitress has stitched on her blouse. Merry Lou’s my name and I’ll be serving you dinner and breakfast and lunch and dinner and breakfast for the next few days or however long it is before you all give up and go back to your own time; that’ll be fifty-three dollars and eight cents, please, not including tip And I hope y’all never come back, y’hear?” He voice had begun to shake; his cigarette, too. “Sorry, Miss Hawkins,” he said then. “We’re all screwed up by the implosion at reentry. As soon as we got here in ETA we learned about it. We’ve known longer than anyone else; we knew as soon as we hit Emergence Time.”

“But there’s nothing we could do,” Crayne said.

“There’s nothing anyone can do,” Addison said to her, and put his arm around her. It felt like a deja vu thing but then it hit him. We’re in a closed time loop, he thought, we keep going through this again and again, trying to solve the reentry problem, each time imagining it’s the first time, the only time… and never succeeding. Which attempt is this? Maybe the millionth; we have sat here a million times, raking the same facts over and over again and getting nowhere. He felt bone-weary, thinking that. And he felt a sort of vast philosophical hate toward all other men, who did not have this enigma to deal with. We all go to one place, he thought, as the Bible says. But… for the three of us, we have been there already. Are lying there now. So it’s wrong to ask us to stand around on the surface of Earth afterward and argue and worry about it and try to figure out what malfunctioned. That should be, rightly, for our heirs to do. We’ve had enough already.

He did not say this aloud, though — for their sake.

“Maybe you bumped into something,” the girl said.

Glancing at the others, Benz said sardonically, “Maybe we ‘bumped into something.’ “

“The TV commentators kept saying that,” Merry Lou said, “about the hazard in reentry of being out of phase spatially and colliding right down to the molecular level with tangent objects, any one of which —” She gestured. “You know. ‘No two objects can occupy the same space at the same time.’ So everything blew up, for that reason.” She glanced around questioningly.

“That is the major risk factor,” Crayne acknowledged. “At least theoretically, as Dr. Fein at Planning calculated when they got into the hazard question. But we had a variety of safety locking devices provided that functioned automatically. Reentry couldn’t occur unless these assists had stabilized us spatially so we would not overlap. Of course, all those devices, in sequence, might have failed. One after the other. I was watching my feedback metric scopes on launch, and they agreed, every one of them, that we were phased properly at that time. And I heard no warning tones. Saw none, neither.” He grimaced. “At least it didn’t happen then.”

Suddenly Benz said, “Do you realize that our next of kin are now rich? All our Federal and commercial life-insurance payoff. Our ‘next of kin’ — God forbid, that’s us, I guess. We can apply for tens of thousands of dollars, cash on the line. Walk into our brokers’ offices and say, ‘I’m dead; lay the heavy bread on me.

Addison Doug was thinking, The public memorial services. That they have planned, after the autopsies. That long line of black-draped Cads going down Pennsylvania Avenue, with all the government dignitaries and double-domed scientist types — *and we’ll be there.* Not once but twice. Once in the oak hand-rubbed brass-fitted flag-draped caskets, but also… maybe riding in open limos, waving at the crowds of mourners.

“The ceremonies,” he said aloud.

The others stared at him, angrily, not comprehending. And then, one by one, they understood; he saw it on their faces.

"No," Benz grated. "That's — impossible."

Crayne shook his head emphatically. "They'll order us to be there, and we will be. Obeying orders."

"Will we have to *smile*?" Addison said. "To fucking *smile*?"

"No," General Toad said slowly, his great wattled head shivering about on his broomstick neck, the color of his skin dirty and mottled, as if the mass of decorations on his stiff-board collar had started part of him decaying away. "You are not to smile, but on the contrary are to adopt a properly grief-stricken manner. In keeping with the national mood of sorrow at this time."

"That'll be hard to do," Crayne said.

The Russian chrononaut showed no response; his thin beaked face, narrow within his translating earphones, remained strained with concern.

"The nation," General Toad said, "will become aware of your presence among us once more for this brief interval; cameras of all major TV networks will pan up to you without warning, and at the same time, the various commentators have been instructed to tell their audiences something like the following." He got out a piece of typed material, put on his glasses, cleared his throat and said, " 'We seem to be focusing on three figures riding together. Can't quite make them out. Can you?' " General Toad lowered the paper. "At this point they'll interrogate their colleagues extempore. Finally they'll exclaim, 'Why, Roger,' or Walter or Ned, as the case may be, according to the individual network —"

"Or Bill," Crayne said. "In case it's the Bufonidae network, down there in the swamp."

General Toad ignored him. “They will severally exclaim, ‘Why Roger I believe we’re seeing the three tempunauts themselves! Does this indeed mean that somehow the difficulty —?’ And then the colleague commentator says in his somewhat more somber voice, ‘What we’re seeing at this time, I think, David,’ or Henry or Pete or Ralph, whichever it is, ‘consists of mankind’s first verified glimpse of what the technical people refer to as Emergence Time Activity or ETA. Contrary to what might seem to be the case at first sight, these are *not* — repeat, not — our three valiant tempunauts as such, as we would ordinarily experience them, but more likely picked up by our cameras as the three of them are temporarily suspended in their voyage to the future, which we initially had reason to hope would take place in a time continuum roughly a hundred years from now… but it would seem that they somehow undershot and are here now, at this moment, which of course is, as we know, our present.’ “

Addison Doug closed his eyes and thought, Crayne will ask him if he can be panned up on by the TV cameras holding a balloon and eating cotton candy. I think we’re all going nuts from this, all of us. And then he wondered, How many times have we gone through this idiotic exchange?

I can’t prove it, he thought wearily. But I know it’s true. We’ve sat here, done this minuscule scrabbling, listened to and said all this crap, many times. He shuddered. Each rinky-dink word…

“What’s the matter?” Benz said acutely.

The Soviet chrononaut spoke up for the first time. “What is the maximum interval of ETA possible to your three-man team? And how large a per cent has been exhausted by now?”

After a pause Crayne said, “They briefed us on that before we came in here today. We’ve consumed approximately one-half of our maximum total ETA interval.”

“However,” General Toad rumbled, “we have scheduled the Day of National Mourning to fall within the expected period remaining to them of ETA time. This required us to speed up the autopsy and other forensic findings, but in view of public sentiment, it was felt…”

The autopsy, Addison Doug thought, and again he shuddered; this time he could not keep his thoughts within himself and he said, “Why don’t we adjourn this nonsense meeting and drop down to pathology and view a few tissue sections enlarged and in color, and maybe we’ll brainstorm a couple of vital concepts that’ll aid medical science in its quest for explanations? Explanations — that’s what we need. Explanations for problems that don’t exist yet; we can develop the problems later.” He paused. “Who agrees?”

“I’m not looking at my spleen up there on the screen,” Benz said. “I’ll ride in the parade but I won’t participate in my own autopsy.”

“You could distribute microscopic purple-stained slices of your own gut to the mourners along the way,” Crayne said. “They could provide each of us with a doggy bag; right, General? We can strew tissue sections like confetti. I still think we should smile.”

“I have researched all the memoranda about smiling,” General Toad said, riffling the pages stacked before him, “and the consensus at policy is that smiling is not in accord with national sentiment. So that issue must be ruled closed. As far as your participating in the autopsical procedures which are now in progress —”

“We’re missing out as we sit here,” Crayne said to Addison Doug. “I always miss out.”

Ignoring him, Addison addressed the Soviet chrononaut. “Officer N. Gauki,” he said into his microphone, dangling on his chest, “what in your mind is the greatest terror facing a time traveler? That there will be an implosion due to coincidence on reentry, such as has occurred in our launch? Or did other traumatic obsessions bother you and your comrade during your own brief but highly successful time flight?”

N. Gauki, after a pause, answered, “R. Plenya and I exchanged views at several informal times. I believe I can speak for us both when I respond to your question by emphasizing our perpetual fear that we had inadvertently entered a closed time loop and would never break out.”

“You’d repeat it forever?” Addison Doug asked.

“Yes, Mr. A. Doug,” the chrononaut said, nodding somberly.

A fear that he had never experienced before overcame Addison Doug. He turned helplessly to Benz and muttered, “Shit.” They gazed at each other.

“I really don’t believe this is what happened,” Benz said to him in a low voice, putting his hand on Doug’s shoulder; he gripped hard, the grip of friendship. “We just imploded on reentry, that’s all. Take it easy.”

“Could we adjourn soon?” Addison Doug said in a hoarse, strangling voice, half rising from his chair. He felt the room and the people in it rushing in at him, suffocating him. Claustrophobia, he realized. Like when I was in grade school, when they flashed a surprise test on our teaching machines, and I saw I couldn’t pass it. “Please,” he said simply, standing. They were all looking at him, with different expressions. The Russian’s face was especially sympathetic, and deeply lined with care. Addison wished — “I want to go home,” he said to them all, and felt stupid.

He was drunk. It was late at night, at a bar on Hollywood Boulevard; fortunately, Merry Lou was with him, and he was having a good time. Everyone was telling him so, anyhow. He clung to Merry Lou and said, “The great unity in life, the supreme unity and meaning, is man and woman. Their absolute unity; right?”

“I know,” Merry Lou said. “We studied that in class.” Tonight, at his request, Merry Lou was a small blonde girl, wearing purple bellbottoms and

high heels and an open midriff blouse. Earlier she had had a lapis lazuli in her navel, but during dinner at Ting Ho's it had popped out and been lost. The owner of the restaurant had promised to keep on searching for it, but Merry Lou had been gloomy ever since. It was, she said, symbolic. But of what she did not say. Or anyhow he could not remember; maybe that was it. She had told him what it meant, and he had forgotten.

An elegant young black at a nearby table, with an Afro and striped vest and overstuffed red tie, had been staring at Addison for some time. He obviously wanted to come over to their table but was afraid to; meanwhile, he kept on staring.

"Did you ever get the sensation," Addison said to Merry Lou, "that you knew exactly what was about to happen? What someone was going to say? Word for word? Down to the slightest detail. As if you had already lived through it once before?"

"Everybody gets into that space," Merry Lou said. She sipped a Bloody Mary.

The black rose and walked toward them. He stood by Addison. "I'm sorry to bother you, sir."

Addison said to Merry Lou, "He's going to say, 'Don't I know you from somewhere? Didn't I see you on TV?' "

"That was precisely what I intended to say," the black said.

Addison said, "You undoubtedly saw my picture on page forty-six of the current issue of *Time*, the section on new medical discoveries. I'm the G.P. from a small town in Iowa catapulted to fame by my invention of a widespread, easily available cure for eternal life. Several of the big pharmaceutical houses are already bidding on my vaccine."

“That might have been where I saw your picture,” the black said, but he did not appear convinced. Nor did he appear drunk; he eyed Addison Doug intensely. “May I seat myself with you and the lady?”

“Sure,” Addison Doug said. He now saw, in the man’s hand, the ID of the U.S. security agency that had ridden herd on the project from the start.

“Mr. Doug,” the security agent said as he seated himself beside Addison, “you really shouldn’t be here shooting off your mouth like this. If I recognized you some other dude might and break out. It’s all classified until the Day of Mourning. Technically, you’re in violation of a Federal Statute by being here; did you realize that? I should haul you in. But this is a difficult situation; we don’t want to do something uncool and make a scene. Where are your two colleagues?”

“At my place,” Merry Lou said. She had obviously not seen the ID. “Listen,” she said sharply to the agent, “why don’t you get lost? My husband here has been through a grueling ordeal, and this is his only chance to unwind.”

Addison looked at the man. “I knew what you were going to say before you came over here.” Word for word, he thought. I am right, and Benz is wrong and this will keep happening, this replay.

“Maybe,” the security agent said, “I can induce you to go back to Miss Hawkins’ place voluntarily. Some info arrived” — he tapped the tiny earphone in his right ear — “just a few minutes ago, to all of us, to deliver to you, marked urgent, if we located you. At the launchsite ruins… they’ve been combing through the rubble, you know?”

“I know,” Addison said.

“They think they have their first clue. Something was brought back by one of you. From ETA, over and above what you took, in violation of all your pre-launch training.”

“Let me ask you this,” Addison Doug said. “Suppose somebody does see me? Suppose somebody does recognize me? So what?”

“The public believes that even though reentry failed, the flight into time, the first American time-travel launch, was successful. Three U.S. tempunauts were thrust a hundred years into the future — roughly twice as far as the Soviet launch of last year. That you only went a *week* will be less of a shock if it’s believed that you three chose deliberately to remanifest at this continuum because you wished to attend, in fact felt compelled to attend —”

“We wanted to be in the parade,” Addison interrupted. “Twice.”

“You were drawn to the dramatic and somber spectacle of your own funeral procession, and will be glimpsed there by the alert camera crews of all major networks. Mr. Doug, really, an awful lot of high-level planning and expense have gone into this to help correct a dreadful situation; trust us, believe me. It’ll be easier on the public, and that’s vital, if there’s ever to be another U.S. time shot. And that is, after all, what we all want.”

Addison Doug stared at him. “We want what?”

Uneasily, the security agent said, “To take further trips into time. As you have done. Unfortunately, you yourself cannot ever do so again, because of the tragic implosion and death of the three of you. But other tempunauts —”

“We want what? Is that what we want?” Addison’s voice rose; people at nearby tables were watching now. Nervously.

“Certainly,” the agent said. “And keep your voice down.”

“I don’t want that,” Addison said. “I want to stop. To stop forever. To just lie in the ground, in the dust, with everyone else. To see no more summers — the *same* summer.”

“Seen one, you’ve seen them all,” Merry Lou said hysterically. “I think he’s right, Addi; we should get out of here. You’ve had too many drinks, and it’s late, and this news about the —”

Addison broke in, “What was brought back? How much extra mass?”

The security agent said, “Preliminary analysis shows that machinery weighing about one hundred pounds was lugged back into the time-field of the module and picked up along with you. This much mass —” The agent gestured. “That blew up the pad right on the spot. It couldn’t begin to compensate for that much more than had occupied its open area at launch time.”

“Wow!” Merry Lou said, eyes wide. “Maybe somebody sold one of you a quadraphonic phono for a dollar ninety-eight including fifteen-inch air-suspension speakers and a lifetime supply of Neil Diamond records.” She tried to laugh, but failed; her eyes dimmed over. “Addi,” she whispered, “I’m sorry. But it’s sort of — weird. I mean, it’s absurd; you all were briefed, weren’t you, about your return weight? You weren’t even to add so much as a piece of paper to what you took. I even saw Dr. Fein demonstrating the reasons on TV. And one of you hoisted a hundred pounds of machinery into that field? You must have been trying to self-destruct, to do that!” Tears slid from her eyes; one tear rolled out onto her nose and hung there. He reached reflexively to wipe it away, as if helping a little girl rather than a grown one.

“I’ll fly you to the analysis site,” the security agent said, standing up. He and Addison helped Merry Lou to her feet; she trembled as she stood a moment, finishing her Bloody Mary. Addison felt acute sorrow for her, but then, almost at once, it passed. He wondered why. One can weary even of that, he conjectured. Of caring for someone. If it goes on too long — on and on. Forever. And, at last, even after that, into something no one before, not God Himself, maybe, had ever had to suffer and in the end, for all His great heart, succumb to.

As they walked through the crowded bar toward the street, Addison Doug said to the security agent, “Which one of us —”

“They know which one,” the agent said as he held the door to the street open for Merry Lou. The agent stood, now, behind Addison, signaling for a gray Federal car to land at the red parking area. Two other security agents, in uniform, hurried toward them.

“Was it me?” Addison Doug asked.

“You better believe it,” the security agent said.

The funeral procession moved with aching solemnity down Pennsylvania Avenue, three flag-draped caskets and dozens of black limousines passing between rows of heavily coated, shivering mourners. A low haze hung over the day, gray outlines of buildings faded into the rain-drenched murk of the Washington March day.

Scrutinizing the lead Cadillac through prismatic binoculars, TV’s top news and public-events commentator, Henry Cassidy, droned on at his vast unseen audience, “… sad recollections of that earlier train among the wheatfields carrying the coffin of Abraham Lincoln back to burial and the nation’s capital. And what a sad day this is, and what appropriate weather, with its dour overcast and sprinkles!” In his monitor he saw the zoomar lens pan up on the fourth Cadillac, as it followed those with the caskets of the dead tempunauts.

His engineer tapped him on the arm.

“We appear to be focusing on three unfamiliar figures so far not identified, riding together,” Henry Cassidy said into his neck mike, nodding agreement. “So far I’m unable to quite make them out. Are your location and vision any better from where you’re placed, Everett?” he inquired of his colleague and pressed the button that notified Everett Branton to replace him on the air.

“Why, Henry,” Branton said in a voice of growing excitement, “I believe we’re actually eyewitness to the three American tempunauts as they remanifest themselves on their historic journey into the future!”

“Does this signify,” Cassidy said, “that somehow they have managed to solve and overcome the —”

“Afraid not, Henry,” Branton said in his slow, regretful voice. “What we’re eyewitnessing to our complete surprise consists of the Western world’s first verified glimpse of what the technical people refer to as Emergence Time Activity.”

“Ah, yes, ETA,” Cassidy said brightly, reading it off the official script the Federal authorities had handed to him before air time.

“Right, Henry. Contrary to what *might* seem to be the case at first sight, these are not — repeat *not* — our three brave tempunauts as such, as we would ordinarily experience them —”

“I grasp it now, Everett,” Cassidy broke in excitedly, since his authorized script read CASS BREAKS IN EXCITEDLY . “Our three tempunauts have momentarily suspended in their historic voyage to the future, which we believe will span across a time-continuum roughly a century from now… It would seem that the overwhelming grief and drama of this unanticipated day of mourning has caused them to —”

“Sorry to interrupt, Henry,” Everett Branton said, “but I think, since the procession has momentarily halted on its slow march forward, that we might be able to —”

“No!” Cassidy said, as a note was handed him in a swift scribble, reading: *Do not interview nauts. Urgent. Dis. previous inst.* “I don’t think we’re going to be able to…” he continued, “… to speak briefly with tempunauts Benz, Crayne, and Doug, as you had hoped, Everett. As we had all briefly hoped to.” He wildly waved the boom-mike back; it had already

begun to swing out expectantly toward the stopped Cadillac. Cassidy shook his head violently at the mike technician and his engineer.

Perceiving the boom-mike swinging at them Addison Doug stood up in the back of the open Cadillac. Cassidy groaned. He wants to speak, he realized. Didn't they reinstruct *him?* Why am I the only one they get across to? Other boom-mikes representing other networks plus radio station interviewers on foot now were rushing out to thrust up their microphones into the faces of the three tempunauts, especially Addison Doug's. Doug was already beginning to speak, in response to a question shouted up to him by a reporter. With his boom-mike off, Cassidy couldn't hear the question, nor Doug's answer. With reluctance, he signaled for his own boom-mike to trigger on.

"… before," Doug was saying loudly.

"In what manner, 'All this has happened before'?" the radio reporter, standing close to the car, was saying.

"I mean," U.S. tempunaut Addison Doug declared, his face red and strained, "that I have stood here in this spot and said again and again, and all of you have viewed this parade and our deaths at reentry endless times, a closed cycle of trapped time which must be broken."

"Are you seeking," another reporter jabbered up at Addison Doug, "for a solution to the reentry implosion disaster which can be applied in retrospect so that when you do return to the past you will be able to correct the malfunction and avoid the tragedy which cost — or for you three, will cost — your lives?"

Tempunaut Benz said, "We are doing that, yes."

"Trying to ascertain the cause of the violent implosion and eliminate the cause before we return," tempunaut Crayne added, nodding. "We have learned already that, for reasons unknown, a mass of nearly one hundred

pounds of miscellaneous Volkswagen motor parts, including cylinders, the head…”

This is awful, Cassidy thought. “This is amazing!” he said aloud, into his neck mike. “The already tragically deceased U.S. tempunauts, with a determination that could emerge only from the rigorous training and discipline to which they were subjected — and we wondered why at the time but can clearly see why now — have already analyzed the mechanical slip-up responsible, evidently, for their own deaths, and have begun the laborious process of sifting through and eliminating causes of that slip-up so that they can return to their original launch site and reenter without mishap.”

“One wonders,” Branton mumbled onto the air and into his feedback earphone, “what the consequences of this alteration of the near past will be. If in reentry they do *not* implode and are *not* killed, then they will not — well, it’s too complex for me, Henry, these time paradoxes that Dr. Fein at the Time Extrusion Labs in Pasadena has so frequently and eloquently brought to our attention.”

Into all the microphones available, of all sorts, tempunaut Addison Doug was saying, more quietly now, “We must not eliminate the cause of reentry implosion. The only way out of this trap is for us to die. Death is the only solution for this. For the three of us.” He was interrupted as the procession of Cadillacs began to move forward.

Shutting off his mike momentarily, Henry Cassidy said to his engineer, “Is he nuts?”

“Only time will tell,” his engineer said in a hard-to-hear voice.

“An extraordinary moment in the history of the United States’ involvement in time travel,” Cassidy said, then, into his now live mike. “Only time will tell — if you will pardon the inadvertent pun — whether tempunaut Doug’s cryptic remarks, uttered impromptu at this moment of supreme suffering for him, as in a sense to a lesser degree it is for all of us,

are the words of a man deranged by grief or an accurate insight into the macabre dilemma that in theoretical terms we knew all along might eventually confront — confront and strike down with its lethal blow — a time-travel launch, either ours or the Russians'."

He segued, then, to a commercial.

"You know," Branton's voice muttered in his ear, not on the air but just to the control room and to him, "if he's right they ought to let the poor bastards die."

"They ought to release them," Cassidy agreed. "My God, the way Doug looked and talked, you'd imagine he'd gone through this for a thousand years and then some! I wouldn't be in his shoes for anything."

"I'll bet you fifty bucks," Branton said, "they have gone through this before. Many times."

"Then we have, too," Cassidy said.

Rain fell now, making all the lined-up mourners shiny. Their faces, their eyes, even their clothes — everything glistened in wet reflections of broken, fractured light, bent and sparkling, as, from gathering gray formless layers above them, the day darkened.

"Are we on the air?" Branton asked.

Who knows? Cassidy thought. He wished the day would end.

The Soviet chrononaut N. Gauki lifted both hands impassionedly and spoke to the Americans across the table from him in a voice of extreme urgency. "It is the opinion of myself and my colleague R. Plenya, who for his pioneering achievements in time travel has been certified a Hero of the Soviet People, and rightly so, that based on our own experience and on theoretical material developed both in your own academic circles and in the

soviet Academy of Sciences of the USSR, we believe that tempunaut A. Doug's fears may be justified. And his deliberate destruction of himself and his teammates at reentry, by hauling a huge mass of auto back with him from ETA, in violation of his orders, should be regarded as the act of a desperate man with no other means of escape. Of course, the decision is up to you. We have only advisory position in this matter."

Addison Doug played with his cigarette lighter on the table and did not look up. His ears hummed, and he wondered what that meant. It had an electronic quality. Maybe we're within the module again, he thought. But he didn't perceive it; he felt the reality of the people around him, the table, the blue plastic lighter between his fingers. No smoking in the module during reentry, he thought. He put the lighter carefully away in his pocket.

"We've developed no concrete evidence whatsoever," General Toad said, "that a closed time loop has been set up. There's only the subjective feelings of fatigue on the part of Mr. Doug. Just his belief that he's done all this repeatedly. As he says, it is very probably psychological in nature." He rooted, piglike, among the papers before him. "I have a report, not disclosed to the media, from four psychiatrists at Yale on his psychological makeup. Although unusually stable, there is a tendency toward cyclothymia on his part, culminating in acute depression. This naturally was taken into account long before the launch, but it was calculated that the joyful qualities of the two others in the team would offset this functionally. Anyhow, that depressive tendency in him is exceptionally high, now." He held the paper out, but no one at the table accepted it. "Isn't it true, Dr. Fein," he said, "that an acutely depressed person experiences time in a peculiar way, that is, circular time, time repeating itself, getting nowhere, around and around? The person gets so psychotic that he refuses to let go of the past. Reruns it in his head constantly."

"But you see," Dr. Fein said, "this subjective sensation of being trapped is perhaps all we would have." This was the research physicist whose basic work had laid the theoretical foundation for the project. "If a closed loop did unfortunately lock into being."

“The general,” Addison Doug said, “is using words he doesn’t understand.”

“I researched the one I was unfamiliar with.” General Toad said. “The technical psychiatric terms… I know what they mean.”

To Addison Doug, Benz said, “Where’d you get all those VW parts, Addi?”

“I don’t have them yet,” Addison Doug said.

“Probably picked up the first junk he could lay his hands on,” Crayne said. “Whatever was available, just before we started back.”

“Will start back,” Addison Doug corrected.

“Here are my instructions to the three of you,” General Toad said. “You are not in any way to attempt to cause damage or implosion or malfunction during reentry, either by lugging back extra mass or by any other method that enters your mind. You are to return as scheduled and in replica of the prior simulations. This especially applies to you, Mr. Doug.” The phone by his right arm buzzed. He frowned, picked up the receiver. An interval passed, and then he scowled deeply and set the receiver back down, loudly.

“You’ve been overruled,” Dr. Fein said.

“Yes, I have,” General Toad said. “And I must say at this time that I am personally glad because my decision was an unpleasant one.”

“Then we can arrange for implosion at reentry,” Benz said after a pause. “The three of you are to make the decision,” General Toad said. “Since it involves your lives. It’s been entirely left up to you. Whichever way you want it. If you’re convinced you’re in a closed time loop, and you believe a massive implosion at reentry will abolish it —” He ceased talking, as

tempunaut Doug rose to his feet. “Are you going to make another speech, Doug?” he said.

“I just want to thank everyone involved,” Addison Doug said. “For letting us decide.” He gazed haggard-faced and wearily around at all the individuals seated at the table. “I really appreciate it.”

“You know,” Benz said slowly, “blowing us up at reentry could add nothing to the chances of abolishing a closed loop. In fact that could do it, Doug.”

“Not if it kills us all,” Crayne said.

“You agree with Addi?” Benz said.

“Dead is dead,” Crayne said. “I’ve been pondering it. What other way is more likely to get us out of this? Than if we’re dead? What possible other way?”

“You may be in no loop,” Dr. Fein pointed out.

“But we may be,” Crayne said.

Doug, still on his feet, said to Crayne and Benz, “Could we include Merry Lou in our decision-making?”

“Why?” Benz said.

“I can’t think too clearly any more,” Doug said. “Merry Lou can help me; I depend on her.”

“Sure,” Crayne said. Benz, too, nodded.

General Toad examined his wristwatch stoically and said, “Gentlemen, this concludes our discussion.”

Soviet chrononaut Gauki removed his headphones and neck mike and hurried toward the three U.S. tempunauts, his hand extended; he was apparently saying something in Russian, but none of them could understand it. They moved away somberly, clustering close.

“In my opinion you’re nuts, Addi,” Benz said. “But it would appear that I’m the minority now.”

“If he *is* right,” Crayne said, “if — one chance in a billion — if we are going back again and again forever, that would justify it.”

“Could we go see Merry Lou?” Addison Doug said. “Drive over to her place now?”

“She’s waiting outside,” Crayne said.

Striding up to stand beside the three tempunauts, General Toad said, “You know, what made the determination go the way it did was the public reaction to how you, Doug, looked and behaved during the funeral procession. The NSC advisors came to the conclusion that the public would, like you, rather be certain it’s over for all of you. That it’s more of a relief to them to know you’re free of your mission than to save the project and obtain a perfect reentry. I guess you really made a lasting impression on them, Doug. That whining you did.” He walked away, then, leaving the three of them standing there alone.

“Forget him,” Crayne said to Addison Doug. “Forget everyone like him. We’ve got to do what we have to.”

“Merry Lou will explain it to me,” Doug said. She would know what to do, what would be right.

“I’ll go get her,” Crayne said, “and after that the four of us can drive somewhere, maybe to her place, and decide what to do. Okay?”

“Thank you,” Addison Doug said, nodding; he glanced around for her hopefully, wondering where she was. In the next room, perhaps, somewhere close. “I appreciate that,” he said.

Benz and Crayne eyed each other. He saw that, but did not know what it meant. He knew only that he needed someone, Merry Lou most of all, to help him understand what the situation was. And what to finalize on to get them out of it.

Merry Lou drove them north from Los Angeles in the superfast lane of the freeway toward Ventura, and after that inland to Ojai. The four of them said very little. Merry Lou drove well, as always; leaning against her, Addison Doug felt himself relax into a temporary sort of peace.

“There’s nothing like having a chick drive you,” Crayne said, after many miles had passed in silence.

“It’s an aristocratic sensation,” Benz murmured. “To have a woman do the driving. Like you’re nobility being chauffeured.”

Merry Lou said, “Until she runs into something. Some big slow object.”

Addison Doug said, “When you saw me trudging up to your place… up the redwood round path the other day. What did you think? Tell me honestly.”

“You looked,” the girl said, “as if you’d done it many times. You looked worn and tired and — ready to die. At the end.” She hesitated. “I’m sorry, but that’s how you looked, Addi. I thought to myself, he knows the way too well.”

“Like I’d done it too many times.”

“Yes,” she said.

“Then you vote for implosion,” Addison Doug said.

“Well —”

“Be honest with me,” he said.

Merry Lou said, “Look in the back seat. The box on the floor.”

With a flashlight from the glove compartment the three men examined the box. Addison Doug, with fear, saw its contents. VW motor parts, rusty and worn. Still oily.

“I got them from behind a foreign-car garage near my place,” Merry Lou said. “On the way to Pasadena. The first junk I saw that seemed as if it’d be heavy enough. I had heard them say on TV at launch time that anything over fifty pounds up to —”

“It’ll do it,” Addison Doug said. “It did do it.”

“So there’s no point in going to your place,” Crayne said. “It’s decided. We might as well head south toward the module. And initiate the procedure for getting out of ETA. And back to reentry.” His voice was heavy but evenly pitched. “Thanks for your vote, Miss Hawkins.”

She said, “You are all so tired.”

“I’m not,” Benz said. “I’m mad. Mad as hell.”

“At me?” Addison Doug said.

“I don’t know,” Benz said. “It’s just — Hell.” He lapsed into brooding silence then. Hunched over, baffled and inert. Withdrawn as far as possible from the others in the car.

At the next freeway junction she turned the car south. A sense of freedom seemed now to fill her, and Addison Doug felt some of the weight, the fatigue, ebbing already.

On the wrist of each of the three men the emergency alert receiver buzzed its warning tone; they all started.

“What’s that mean?” Merry Lou said, slowing the car.

“We’re to contact General Toad by phone as soon as possible,” Crayne said. He pointed. “There’s a Standard Station over there; take the next exit, Miss Hawkins. We can phone in from there.”

A few minutes later Merry Lou brought her car to a halt beside the outdoor phone booth. “I hope it’s not bad news,” she said.

“I’ll talk first,” Doug said, getting out. Bad news, he thought with labored amusement. Like what? He crunched stiffly across to the phone booth, entered, shut the door behind him, dropped in a dime and dialed the toll-free number.

“Well, do I have news!” General Toad said when the operator had put him on the line. “It’s a good thing we got hold of you. Just a minute — I’m going to let Dr. Fein tell you this himself. You’re more apt to believe him than me.” Several clicks, and then Dr. Fein’s reedy, precise, scholarly voice, but intensified by urgency.

“What’s the bad news?” Addison Doug said.

“Not bad, necessarily,” Dr. Fein said. “I’ve had computations run since our discussion, and it would appear — by that I mean it is statistically probable but still unverified for a certainty — that you are right, Addison. You are in a closed time loop.”

Addison Doug exhaled raggedly. You nowhere autocratic mother, he thought. You probably knew all along.

“However,” Dr. Fein said excitedly, stammering a little, “I also calculate — we jointly do, largely through Cal Tech — that the greatest likelihood of maintaining the loop is to implode on reentry. Do you understand, Addison? If you lug all those rusty VW parts back and implode, then your statistical chances of closing the loop forever is greater than if you simply reenter and all goes well.”

Addison Doug said nothing.

“In fact, Addi — and this is the severe part that I have to stress — implosion at reentry, especially a massive, calculated one of the sort we seem to see shaping up — do you grasp all this, Addi? Am I getting through to you? For Chrissake, Addi? Virtually *guarantees* the locking in of an absolutely unyielding loop such as you’ve got in mind. Such as we’ve all been worried about from the start.” A pause. “Addi? Are you there?”

Addison Doug said, “I want to die.”

“That’s your exhaustion from the loop. God knows how many repetitions there’ve been already of the three of you —”

“No,” he said and started to hang up.

“Let me speak with Benz and Crayne,” Dr. Fein said rapidly. “Please, before you go ahead with reentry. Especially Benz; I’d like to speak with him in particular. Please, Addison. For their sake; your almost total exhaustion has —”

He hung up. Left the phone booth, step by step.

As he climbed back into the car, he heard their two alert receivers still buzzing. “General Toad said the automatic call for us would keep your two receivers doing that for a while,” he said. And shut the car door after him. “Let’s take off.”

“Doesn’t he want to talk to us?” Benz said.

Addison Doug said, “General Toad wanted to inform us that they have a little something for us. We’ve been voted a special Congressional Citation for valor or some damn thing like that. A special medal they never voted anyone before. To be awarded posthumously.”

“Well, hell — that’s about the only way it can be awarded,” Crayne said.

Merry Lou, as she started up the engine, began to cry.

“It’ll be a relief,” Crayne said presently, as they returned bumpily to the freeway, “when it’s over.”

It won’t be long now, Addison Doug’s mind declared.

On their wrists the emergency alert receivers continued to put out their combined buzzing.

“They will nibble you to death,” Addison Doug said. “The endless wearing down by various bureaucratic voices.”

The others in the car turned to gaze at him inquiringly, with uneasiness mixed with perplexity.

“Yeah,” Crayne said. “These automatic alerts are really a nuisance.” He sounded tired. As tired as I am, Addison Doug thought. And, realizing this,

he felt better. It showed how right he was.

Great drops of water struck the windshield; it had now begun to rain. That pleased him too. It reminded him of that most exalted of all experiences within the shortness of his life: the funeral procession moving slowly down Pennsylvania Avenue, the flag-draped caskets. Closing his eyes he leaned back and felt good at last. And heard, all around him once again, the sorrow-bent people. And, in his head, dreamed of the special Congressional Medal. For weariness, he thought. A medal for being tired.

He saw, in his head, himself in other parades too, and in the deaths of many. But really it was one death and one parade. Slow cars moving along the street in Dallas and with Dr. King as well… He saw himself return again and again, in his closed cycle of life, to the national mourning that he could not and they could not forget. He would be there; they would always be there; it would always be, and every one of them would return together again and again forever. To the place, the moment, they wanted to be. The event which meant the most to all of them.

This was his gift to them, the people, his country. He had bestowed upon the world a wonderful burden. The dreadful and weary miracle of eternal life.

The Pre-Persons

Past the grove of cypress trees Walter — he had been playing king of the mountain — saw the white truck, and he knew it for what it was. He thought, That's the abortion truck. Come to take some kid in for a postpartum down at the abortion place.

And he thought, Maybe my folks called it. For me.

He ran and hid among the blackberries, feeling the scratching of the thorns but thinking, It's better than having the air sucked out of your lungs. That's how they do it; they perform all the P.P.s on all the kids there at the same time. They have a big room for it. For the kids nobody wants.

Burrowing deeper into the blackberries, he listened to hear if the truck stopped; he heard its motor.

"I am invisible," he said to himself, a line he had learned at the fifth-grade play of *Midsummer Night's Dream*, a line Oberon, whom he had played, had said. And after that no one could see him. Maybe that was true now. Maybe the magic saying worked in real life; so he said it again to himself, "I am invisible." But he knew he was not. He could still see his arms and legs and shoes, and he knew they — everyone, the abortion truck man especially, and his mom and dad — they could see him too. If they looked.

If it was him they were after this time.

He wished he was a king; he wished he had magic dust all over him and a shining crown that glistened, and ruled fairyland and had Puck to confide to. To ask for advice from, even. Advice even if he himself was a king and bickered with Titania, his wife.

I guess, he thought, saying something doesn't make it true.

Sun burned down on him and he squinted, but mostly he listened to the abortion truck motor; it kept making its sound, and his heart gathered hope as the sound went on and on. Some other kid, turned over to the abortion clinic, not him; someone up the road.

He made his difficult exit from the berry brambles shaking and in many places scratched and moved step by step in the direction of his house. And as he trudged he began to cry, mostly from the pain of the scratches but also from fear and relief.

"Oh, good Lord," his mother exclaimed, on seeing him. "What in the name of God have you been doing?"

He said stammeringly, "I — saw — the abortion — truck."

"And you thought it was for you?" Mutely, he nodded.

"Listen, Walter," Cynthia Best said, kneeling down and taking hold of his trembling hands, "I promise, your dad and I both promise, you'll never be sent to the County Facility. Anyhow you're too old. They only take children up to twelve."

"But Jeff Vogel —"

"His parents got him in just before the new law went into effect. They couldn't take him now, legally. They couldn't take you now. Look — you have a soul; the law says a twelve-year-old boy has a soul. So he can't go to the County Facility. See? You're safe. Whenever you see the abortion truck, it's for someone else, not you. Never for you. Is that clear? It's come for another younger child who doesn't have a soul yet, a pre-person."

Staring down, not meeting his mother's gaze, he said, "I don't feel like I got a soul; I feel like I always did."

"It's a legal matter," his mother said briskly. "Strictly according to age. And you're past the age. The Church of Watchers got Congress to pass the law — actually they, those church people wanted a lower age; they claimed the soul entered the body at three years old, but a compromise bill was put through. The important thing for you is that you are legally safe, however you feel inside; do you see?"

"Okay," he said, nodding.

"You knew that."

He burst out with anger and grief, "What do you think it's like, maybe waiting every day for someone to come and put you in a wire cage in a truck and —"

"Your fear is irrational," his mother said.

"I saw them take Jeff Vogel that day. He was crying, and the man just opened the back of the truck and put him in and shut the back of the truck."

"That was two years ago. You're weak." His mother glared at him. "Your grandfather would whip you if he saw you now and heard you talk this way. Not your father. He'd just grin and say something stupid. Two years later, and intellectually you know you're past the legal maximum age! How —" She struggled for the word. "You are being *depraved*."

"And he never came back."

"Perhaps someone who wanted a child went inside the County Facility and found him and adopted him. Maybe he's got a better set of parents who

really care for him. They keep them thirty days before they destroy them." She corrected herself. "Put them to sleep, I mean."

He was not reassured. Because he knew "put him to sleep" or "put them to sleep" was a Mafia term. He drew away from his mother, no longer wanting her comfort. She had blown it, as far as he was concerned; she had shown something about herself or, anyhow, the source of what she believed and thought and perhaps did. What all of them did. I know I'm no different, he thought, than two years ago when I was just a little kid; if I have a soul now like the law says, then I had a soul then, or else we have no souls — the only real thing is just a horrible metallic-painted truck with wire over its windows carrying off kids their parents no longer want, parents using an extension of the old abortion law that let them kill an unwanted child before it came out: because it had no "soul" or "identity," it could be sucked out by a vacuum system in less than two minutes. A doctor could do a hundred a day, and it was legal because the unborn child wasn't "human." He was a pre-person. Just like this truck now; they merely set the date forward as to when the soul entered.

Congress had inaugurated a simple test to determine the approximate age at which the soul entered the body: the ability to formulate higher math like algebra. Up to then, it was only body, animal instincts and body, animal reflexes and responses to stimuli. Like Pavlov's dogs when they saw a little water seep in under the door of the Leningrad laboratory; they "knew" but were not human.

I guess I'm human, Walter thought, and looked up into the gray, severe face of his mother, with her hard eyes and rational grimness. I guess I'm like you, he thought. Hey, it's neat to be a human, he thought; then you don't have to be afraid of the truck coming.

"You feel better," his mother observed. "I've lowered your threshold of anxiety."

"I'm not so freaked," Walter said. It was over; the truck had gone and not taken him.

But it would be back in a few days. It cruised perpetually.

Anyhow he had a few days. And then the sight of it — if only I didn't know they suck the air out of the lungs of the kids they have there, he thought. Destroy them that way. Why? Cheaper, his dad had said. Saves the taxpayers money.

He thought then about taxpayers and what they would look like. Something that scowled at all children, he thought. That did not answer if the child asked them a question. A thin face, lined with watch-worry grooves, eyes always moving. Or maybe fat; one or the other. It was the thin one that scared him; it didn't enjoy life nor want life to be. It flashed the message, "Die, go away, sicken, don't exist." And the abortion truck was proof — or the instrument — of it.

"Mom," he said, "how do you shut a County Facility? You know, the abortion clinic where they take the babies and little kids."

"You go and petition the county legislature," his mother said.

"You know what I'd do?" he said. "I'd wait until there were no kids in there, only county employees, and I'd firebomb it."

"Don't talk like that!" his mother said severely, and he saw on her face the stiff lines of the thin taxpayer. And it frightened him; his own mother frightened him. The cold and opaque eyes mirrored nothing, no soul inside, and he thought, *It's you who don't have a soul,* you and your skinny messages not-to-be. Not us.

And then he ran outside to play again.

A bunch more kids had seen the truck; he and they stood around together, talking now and then, but mostly kicking at rocks and dirt, and occasionally stepping on a bad bug.

“Who’d the truck come for?” Walter said.

“Fleischhacker. Earl Fleischhacker.”

“Did they get him?”

“Sure, didn’t you hear the yelling?”

“Was his folks home at the time?”

“Naw, they split earlier on some shuck about ‘taking the car in to be greased.’ “

“*They* called the truck?” Walter said.

“Sure, it’s the law; it’s gotta be the parents. But they were too chickenshit to be there when the truck drove up. Shit, he really yelled; I guess you’re too far away to hear, but he really yelled.”

Walter said, “You know what we ought to do? Firebomb the truck and snuff the driver.”

All the other kids looked at him contemptuously. “They put you in the mental hospital for life if you act out like that.”

“Sometimes for life,” Pete Bride corrected. “Other times they ‘build up a new personality that is socially viable.’ “

“Then what should we do?” Walter said.

“You’re twelve; you’re safe.”

“But suppose they change the law.” Anyhow it did not assuage his anxiety to know that he was technically safe; the truck still came for others and still frightened him. He thought of the younger kids down at the Facility now, looking through the Cyclone fence hour by hour, day after day, waiting and marking the passage of time and hoping someone would come in and adopt them.

“You ever been down there?” he said to Pete Bride. “At the County Facility? All those really little kids, like babies some of them, just maybe a year old. And they don’t even know what’s in store.”

“The babies get adopted,” Zack Yablonski said. “It’s the old ones that don’t stand a chance. They’re the ones that get you; like, they talk to people who come in and put on a good show, like they’re desirable. But people know they wouldn’t be there if they weren’t — you know, undesirable.”

“Let the air out of the tires,” Walter said, his mind working.

“Of the truck? Hey, and you know if you drop a mothball in the gas tank, about a week later the motor wears out. We could do that.”

Ben Blaire said, “But then they’d be after us.”

“They’re after us now,” Walter said.

“I think we ought to firebomb the truck,” Harry Gottlieb said, “but suppose there’re kids in it. It’ll burn them up. The truck picks up maybe — shit, I don’t know. Five kids a day from different parts of the county.”

“You know they even take dogs too?” Walter said. “And cats; you see the truck for that only about once a month. The pound truck it’s called. Otherwise it’s the same; they put them in a big chamber and suck the air out of their lungs and they die. They’d do that even to animals! Little animals!”

“I’ll believe that when I see it,” Harry Gottlieb said, derision on his face, and disbelief. “A truck that carries off dogs.”

He knew it was true, though. Walter had seen the pound truck two different times. Cats, dogs, and mainly us, he thought glumly. I mean, if they’d start with us, it’s natural they’d wind up taking people’s pets, too; we’re not that different. But what kind of a person would do that, even if it is the law? “Some laws are made to be kept, and some to be broken,” he remembered from a book he had read. We ought to firebomb the pound truck first, he thought; that’s the worst, that truck.

Why is it, he wondered, that the more helpless a creature, the easier it was for some people to snuff it? Like a baby in the womb; the original abortions, “pre-partums,” or “pre-persons” they were called now. How could they defend themselves? Who would speak for them? All those lives, a hundred by each doctor a day… and all helpless and silent and then just dead. The fuckers, he thought. That’s why they do it; they know they can do it; they get off on their macho power. And so a little thing that wanted to see the light of day is vacuumed out in less than two minutes. And the doctor goes on to the next chick.

There ought to be an organization, he thought, similar to the Mafia. Snuff the snuffers, or something. A contract man walks up to one of those doctors, pulls out a tube, and sucks the doctor into it, where he shrinks down like an unborn baby. An unborn baby doctor, with a stethoscope the size of a pinhead… he laughed, thinking of that.

Children don’t know. But children know everything, knew too much. The abortion truck, as it drove along, played a Good Humor Man’s jingle:

Jack and Jill

Went up the hill

To fetch a pail of water

A tape loop in the sound system of the truck, built especially by Ampex for GM, blared that out when it wasn't actively nearing a seize. Then the driver shut off the sound system and glided along until he found the proper house. However, once he had the unwanted child in the back of the truck, and was either starting back to the County Facility or beginning another pre-person pick-up, he turned back on

Jack and Jill

Went up the hill

To fetch a pail of water

Thinking of himself, Oscar Ferris, the driver of truck three, finished, "Jack fell down and broke his crown and Jill came tumbling after." What the hell's a crown? Ferris wondered. Probably a private part. He grinned. Probably Jack had been playing with it, or Jill, both of them together. Water, my ass, he thought. I know what they went off into the bushes for. Only, Jack fell down, and his thing broke right off. "Tough luck, Jill," he said aloud as he expertly drove the four-year-old truck along the winding curves of California Highway One.

Kids are like that, Ferris thought. Dirty and playing with dirty things, like themselves.

This was still wild and open country, and many stray children scratched about in the canyons and fields; he kept his eye open, and sure enough — off to his right scampered a small one, about six, trying to get out of sight. Ferris at once pressed the button that activated the siren of the truck. The boy froze, stood in fright, waited as the truck, still playing "Jack and Jill," coasted up beside him and came to a halt.

"Show me your D papers," Ferris said, without getting out of the truck; he leaned one arm out the window, showing his brown uniform and patch; his symbols of authority.

The boy had a scrawny look, like many strays, but, on the other hand, he wore glasses. Tow-headed, in jeans and T-shirt, he stared up in fright at Ferris, making no move to get out his identification.

“You got a D card or not?” Ferris said.

“W-w-w-what’s a ‘D card’?”

In his official voice, Ferris explained to the boy his rights under the law. “Your parent, either one, or legal guardian, fills out form 36-W, which is a formal statement of desirability. That they or him or her regard you as desirable. You don’t have one? Legally, that makes you a stray, even if you have parents who want to keep you; they are subject to a fine of $500.”

“Oh,” the boy said. “Well, I lost it.”

“Then a copy would be on file. They microdot all those documents and records. I’ll take you in —”

“To the County Facility?” Pipe-cleaner legs wobbled in fear.

“They have thirty days to claim you by filling out the 36-W form. If they haven’t done it by then —”

“My mom and dad never agree. Right now I’m staying with my dad.”

“He didn’t give you a D card to identify yourself with.” Mounted transversely across the cab of the truck was a shotgun. There was always the possibility that trouble might break out when he picked up a stray. Reflexively, Ferris glanced up at it. It was there, all right, a pump shotgun. He had used it only five times in his law-enforcement career. It could blow a man into molecules. “I have to take you in,” he said, opening the truck door and bringing out his keys. “There’s another kid back there; you can keep each other company.”

“No,” the boy said. “I won’t go.” Blinking, he confronted Ferris, stubborn and rigid as stone.

“Oh, you probably heard a lot of stories about the County Facility. It’s only the warpies, the creepies, that get put to sleep; any nice normal-looking kid’ll be adopted — we’ll cut your hair and fix you up so you look professionally groomed. We want to find you a home. That’s the whole idea. It’s just a few, those who are — you know — ailing mentally or physically that no one wants. Some well-to-do individual will snap you up in a minute; you’ll see. Then you won’t be running around out here alone with no parents to guide you. You’ll have new parents, and listen — they’ll be paying heavy bread for you; hell, they’ll *register* you. Do you see? It’s more a temporary lodging place where we’re taking you right now, to make you available to prospective new parents.”

“But if nobody adopts me in a month —”

“Hell, you could fall off a cliff here at Big Sur and kill yourself. Don’t worry. The desk at the Facility will contact your blood parents, and most likely they’ll come forth with the Desirability Form (15A) sometime today even. And meanwhile you’ll get a nice ride and meet a lot of new kids. And how often —”

“No,” the boy said.

“This is to inform you,” Ferris said, in a different tone, “that I am a County Official.” He opened his truck door, jumped down, showed his gleaming metal badge to the boy. “I am Peace Officer Ferris and I now order you to enter by the rear of the truck.”

A tall man approached them, walking with wariness; he, like the boy, wore jeans and a T-shirt, but no glasses.

“You the boy’s father?” Ferris said.

The man, hoarsely, said, “Are you taking him to the pound?”

“We consider it a child protection shelter,” Ferris said. “The use of the term ‘pound’ is a radical hippie slur, and distorts — deliberately — the overall picture of what we do.”

Gesturing toward the truck, the man said, “You’ve got kids locked in there in those cages, have you?”

“I’d like to see your ID,” Ferris said. “And I’d like to know if you’ve ever been arrested before.”

“Arrested and found innocent? Or arrested and found guilty?”

“Answer my question, sir,” Ferris said, showing his black flatpack that he used with adults to identify him as a County Peace Officer. “Who are you? Come on, let’s see your ID.”

The man said, “Ed Gantro is my name and I have a record. When I was eighteen, I stole four crates of Coca-Cola from a parked truck.”

“You were apprehended at the scene?”

“No,” the man said. “When I took the empties back to cash in on the refunds. That’s when they seized me. I served six months.”

“Have you a Desirability Card for your boy here?” Ferris asked.

“We couldn’t afford the $90 it cost.”

“Well, now it’ll cost you five hundred. You should have gotten it in the first place. My suggestion is that you consult an attorney.” Ferris moved toward the boy, declaring officially. “I’d like you to join the other juveniles

in the rear section of the vehicle.” To the man he said, “Tell him to do as instructed.”

The man hesitated and then said. “Tim, get in the goddamn truck. And we’ll get a lawyer; we’ll get the D card for you. It’s futile to make trouble — technically you’re a stray.”

” ‘A stray,’ ” the boy said, regarding his father.

Ferris said, “Exactly right. You have thirty days, you know, to raise the __”

“Do you also take cats?” the boy said. “Are there any cats in there? I really like cats; they’re all right.”

“I handle only P.P. cases,” Ferris said. “Such as yourself.” With a key he unlocked the back of the truck. “Try not to relieve yourself while you’re in the truck; it’s hard as hell to get the odor and stains out.”

The boy did not seem to understand the word; he gazed from Ferris to his father in perplexity.

“Just don’t go to the bathroom while you’re in the truck,” his father explained. “They want to keep it sanitary, because that cuts down their maintenance costs.” His voice was savage and grim.

“With stray dogs or cats,” Ferris said, “they just shoot them on sight, or put out poison bait.”

“Oh, yeah, I know that Warfarin,” the boy’s father said. “The animal eats it over a period of a week, and then he bleeds to death internally.”

“With no pain,” Ferris pointed out.

“Isn’t that better than sucking the air from their lungs?” Ed Gantro said. “Suffocating them on a mass basis?”

“Well, with animals the county authorities —”

“I mean the children. Like Tim.” His father stood beside him, and they both looked into the rear of the truck. Two dark shapes could be dimly discerned, crouching as far back as possible, in the starkest form of despair.

“Fleischhacker!” the boy Tim said. “Didn’t you have a D card?”

“Because of energy and fuel shortages,” Ferris was saying, “population must be radically cut. Or in ten years there’ll be no food for anyone. This is one phase of — “

“I had a D card,” Earl Fleischhacker said, “but my folks took it away from me. They didn’t want me any more; so they took it back, and then they called for the abortion truck.” His voice croaked; obviously he had been secretly crying.

“And what’s the difference between a five-month-old fetus and what we have here?” Ferris was saying. “In both cases what you have is an unwanted child. They simply liberalized the laws.”

Tim’s father, staring at him, said, “Do you agree with these laws?”

“Well, it’s really all up to Washington and what they decide will solve our needs in these days of crises,” Ferris said. “I only enforce their edicts. If this law changed — hell. I’d be trucking empty milk cartons for recycling or something and be just as happy.”

“*Just* as happy? You enjoy your work?”

Ferris said, mechanically. “It gives me the opportunity to move around a lot and to meet people.”

Tim’s father Ed Gantro said, “You are insane. This postpartum abortion scheme and the abortion laws before it where the unborn child had no legal rights — it was removed like a tumor. Look what it’s come to. If an unborn child can be killed without due process, why not a born one? What I see in common in both cases is their helplessness; the organism that is killed had no chance, no ability, to protect itself. You know what? I want you to take me in, too. In back of the truck with the three children.”

“But the President and Congress have declared that when you’re past twelve you have a soul,” Ferris said. “I can’t take you. It wouldn’t be right.”

“I have no soul,” Tim’s father said. “I got to be twelve and nothing happened. Take me along, too. Unless you can find my soul.”

“Jeez,” Ferris said.

“Unless you can show me my soul,” Tim’s father said, “unless you can specifically locate it, then I insist you take me in as no different from these kids.”

Ferris said, “I’ll have to use the radio to get in touch with the County Facility, see what they say.”

“You do that,” Tim’s father said, and laboriously clambered up into the rear of the truck, helping Tim along with him. With the other two boys they waited while Peace Officer Ferris, with all his official identification as to who he was, talked on his radio.

“I have here a Caucasian male, approximately thirty, who insists that he be transported to the County Facility with his infant son,” Ferris was saying into his mike. “He claims to have no soul, which he maintains puts him in the class of subtwelve-year-olds. I don’t have with me or know any test to detect the presence of a soul, at least any I can give out here in the boondocks that’ll later on satisfy a court. I mean, he probably can do algebra and higher math; he seems to possess an intelligent mind. But —”

“Affirmative as to bringing him in,” his superior’s voice on the two-way radio came back to him. “We’ll deal with him here.”

“We’re going to deal with you downtown,” Ferris said to Tim’s father, who, with the three smaller figures, was crouched down in the dark recesses of the rear of the truck. Ferris slammed the door, locked it — an extra precaution, since the boys were already netted by electronic bands — and then started up the truck.

Jack and Jill

Went up the hill

To fetch a pail of water

Jack fell down

And broke his crown

Somebody’s sure going to get their crown broke, Ferris thought as he drove along the winding road, and it isn’t going to be me.

“I can’t do algebra,” he heard Tim’s father saying to the three boys. “So I can’t have a soul.”

The Fleischhacker boy said, snidely, “I can, but I’m only nine. So what good does it do me?”

“That’s what I’m going to use as my plea at the Facility,” Tim’s father continued. “Even long division was hard for me. I don’t have a soul. I belong with you three little guys.”

Ferris, in a loud voice, called back, “I don’t want you soiling the truck, you understand? It costs us —”

“Don’t tell me,” Tim’s father said, “because I wouldn’t understand. It would be too complex, the proration and accrual and fiscal terms like that.”

I’ve got a weirdo back there, Ferris thought, and was glad he had the pump shotgun mounted within easy reach. “You know the world is running out of everything,” Ferris called back to them, “energy and apple juice and fuel and bread; we’ve got to keep the population down, and the embolisms from the Pill make it impossible —”

“None of us knows those big words,” Tim’s father broke in.

Angrily, and feeling baffled, Ferris said. “Zero population growth; that’s the answer to the energy and food crisis. It’s like — shit, it’s like when they introduced the rabbit in Australia, and it had no natural enemies, and so it multiplied until, like people —”

“I do understand multiplication,” Tim’s father said. “And adding and subtraction. But that’s all.”

Four crazy rabbits flopping across the road, Ferris thought. People pollute the natural environment, he thought. What must this part of the country have been like before man? Well, he thought, with the postpartum abortions taking place in every county in the U.S. of A. we may see that day; we may stand and look once again upon a virgin land.

We, he thought. I guess there won’t be any we. I mean, he thought, giant sentient computers will sweep out the landscape with their slotted video receptors and find it pleasing.

The thought cheered him up.

“Let’s have an abortion!” Cynthia declared excitedly as she entered the house with an armload of synthogroceries. “Wouldn’t that be neat? Doesn’t that turn you on?”

Her husband Ian Best said dryly, “But first you have to get pregnant. So make an appointment with Dr. Guido — that should cost me only fifty or sixty dollars — and have your I.U.D. removed.”

“I think it’s slipping down anyhow. Maybe, if —” Her pert dark shag-haired head tossed in glee. “It probably hasn’t worked properly since last year. So I could be pregnant now.”

Ian said caustically. “You could put an ad in the *Free Press;* ‘Man wanted to fish out I.U.D. with coathanger.’ “

“But you see,” Cynthia said, following him as he made his way to the master closet to hang up his status-tie and class-coat, “it’s the in thing now, to have an abortion. Look, what do we have? A kid. We have Walter. Every time someone comes over to visit and sees him, I know they’re wondering. ‘Where did you screw up?’ It’s embarrassing.” She added, “And the kind of abortions they give now, for women in early stages — it only costs one hundred dollars… the price of ten gallons of gas! And you can talk about it with practically everybody who drops by for hours.”

Ian turned to face her and said in a level voice. “Do you get to keep the embryo? Bring it home in a bottle or sprayed with special luminous paint so it glows in the dark like a night light?”

“In any color you want!”

“The *embryo*?”

“No, the bottle. And the color of the fluid. It’s in a preservative solution, so really it’s a lifetime acquisition. It even has a written guarantee, I think.”

Ian folded his arms to keep himself calm: alpha state condition. “Do you know that there are people who would want to have a child? Even an ordinary dumb one? That go to the County Facility week after week looking for a little newborn baby? These ideas — there’s been this world panic

about overpopulation. Nine trillion humans stacked like kindling in every block of every city. Okay, if that were going on —" He gestured. "But what we have now is not *enough* children. Or don't you watch TV or read the *Times*?"

"It's a drag," Cynthia said. "For instance, today Walter came into the house freaked out because the abortion truck cruised by. It's a drag taking care of him. *You* have it easy; you're at work. But *me* —"

"You know what I'd like to do to the Gestapo abortion wagon? Have two ex-drinking buddies of mine armed with BARs, one on each side of the road. And when the wagon passes by —"

"It's a ventilated air-conditioned truck, not a wagon."

He glared at her and then went to the bar in the kitchen to fix himself a drink. Scotch will do, he decided. Scotch and milk, a good before-"dinner" drink.

As he mixed his drink, his son Walter came in. He had, on his face, an unnatural pallor.

"The 'bort truck went by today, didn't it?" Ian said.

"I thought maybe —"

"No way. Even if your mother and I saw a lawyer and had a legal document drawn up, an un-D Form, you're too old. So relax."

"I know intellectually," Walter said, "but —"

' 'Do not seek to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee,' " Ian quoted (inaccurately). "Listen, Walt, let me lay something on you." He took a big, long drink of Scotch and milk. "The name of all this is, *kill me*. Kill them when they're the size of a fingernail, or a baseball, or later on, if you

haven’t done it already, suck the air out of the lungs of a ten-year-old boy and let him die. It’s a certain kind of woman advocating this all. They used to call them ‘castrating females.’ Maybe that was once the right term, except that these women, these hard cold women, didn’t just want to — well, they want to do in the *whole boy* or man, make all of them dead, not just the part that makes him a man. Do you see?”

“No,” Walter said, but in a dim sense, very frightening, he did.

After another hit of his drink, Ian said, “And we’ve got one living right here, Walter. Here in our very house.”

“What do we have living here?”

“What the Swiss psychiatrists call a *kindermorder*,” Ian said, deliberately choosing a term he knew his boy wouldn’t understand. “You know what,” he said, “you and I could get onto an Amtrak coach and head north and just keep on going until we reached Vancouver, British Columbia, and we could take a ferry to Vancouver Island and never be seen by anybody down here again.”

“But what about Mom?”

“I would send her a cashier’s check,” Ian said. “Each month. And she would be quite happy with that.”

“It’s cold up there, isn’t it?” Walter said. “I mean, they have hardly any fuel and they wear —”

“About like San Francisco. Why? Are you afraid of wearing a lot of sweaters and sitting close to the fireplace? What did you see today that frightened you a hell of a lot more?”

“Oh, yeah.” He nodded somberly.

“We could live on a little island off Vancouver Island and raise our own food. You can plant stuff up there and it grows. And the truck won’t come there; you’ll never see it again. They have different laws. The women up there are different. There was this one girl I knew when I was up there for a while, a long time ago; she had long black hair and smoked Players cigarettes all the time and never ate anything or ever stopped talking. Down here we’re seeing a civilization in which the desire by women to destroy their own —” Ian broke off; his wife had walked into the kitchen.

“If you drink any more of that stuff,” she said to him, “you’ll barf it up.”

“Okay,” Ian said irritably. “Okay!”

“And don’t yell,” Cynthia said. “I thought for dinner tonight it’d be nice if you took us out. Dal Key’s said on TV they have steak for early comers.”

Wrinkling his nose, Walter said, “They have raw oysters.”

“Blue points,” Cynthia said. “In the half shell, on ice. I love them. All right, Ian? Is it decided?”

To his son Walter, Ian said. “A raw blue point oyster looks like nothing more on earth than what the surgeon —” He became silent, then. Cynthia glared at him, and his son was puzzled. “Okay,” he said, “but I get to order steak.”

“Me too,” Walter said.

Finishing his drink, Ian said more quietly, “When was the last time you fixed dinner here in the house? For the three of us?”

“I fixed you that pigs’ ears and rice dish on Friday,” Cynthia said. “Most of which went to waste because it was something new and on the nonmandatory list. Remember, *dear*?”

Ignoring her, Ian said to his son, “Of course, that type of woman will sometimes, even often, be found up there, too. She has existed throughout time and all cultures. But since Canada has no law permitting postpartum —” He broke off. “It’s the carton of milk talking,” he explained to Cynthia. “They adulterate it these days with sulfur. Pay no attention or sue somebody; the choice is yours.”

Cynthia, eyeing him, said, “Are you running a fantasy number in your head again about splitting?”

“Both of us,” Walter broke in. “Dad’s taking me with him.”

“Where?” Cynthia said, casually.

Ian said. “Wherever the Amtrak track leads us.”

“We’re going to Vancouver Island in Canada,” Walter said.

“Oh, really?” Cynthia said.

After a pause Ian said, “Really.”

“And what the shit am I supposed to do when you’re gone? Peddle my ass down at the local bar? How’ll I meet the payments on the various —”

“I will continually mail you checks,” Ian said. “Bonded by giant banks.”

“Sure. You bet. Yep. Right.”

“You could come along,” Ian said, “and catch fish by leaping into English Bay and grinding them to death with your sharp teeth. You could rid British Columbia of its fish population overnight. All those ground-up fish, wondering vaguely what happened… swimming along one minute and then this — ogre, this fish-destroying monster with a single luminous eye in

the center of its forehead, falls on them and grinds them into grit. There would soon be a legend. News like that spreads. At least among the last surviving fish."

"Yeah, but Dad," Walter said, "suppose there are no surviving fish."

"Then it will have been all in vain," Ian said, "except for your mother's own personal pleasure at having bitten to death an entire species in British Columbia, where fishing is the largest industry anyhow, and so many other species depend on it for survival."

"But then everyone in British Columbia will be out of work," Walter said.

"No," Ian said, "they will be cramming the dead fish into cans to sell to Americans. You see, Walter, in the olden days, before your mother multi-toothedly bit to death all the fish in British Columbia, the simple rustics stood with stick in hand, and when a fish swam past, they whacked the fish over the head. This will *create* jobs, not eliminate them. Millions of cans of suitably marked —"

"You know," Cynthia said quickly, "he believes what you tell him."

Ian said, "What I tell him is true." Although not, he realized, in a literal sense. To his wife he said, "I'll take you out to dinner. Get our ration stamps, put on that blue knit blouse that shows off your boobs; that way you'll get a lot of attention and maybe they won't remember to collect the stamps."

"What's a 'boob'?" Walter asked.

"Something fast becoming obsolete," Ian said, "like the Pontiac GTO. Except as an ornament to be admired and squeezed. Its function is dying away." As is our race, he thought, once we gave full rein to those who

would destroy the unborn — in other words, the most helpless creatures alive.

“A boob,” Cynthia said severely to her son, “is a mammary gland that ladies possess which provides milk to their young.”

“Generally there are two of them,” Ian said. “Your operational boob and then your backup boob, in case there is powerful failure in the operational one. I suggest the elimination of a step in all this pre-person abortion mania,” he said. “We will send all the boobs in the world to the County Facilities. The milk, if any, will be sucked out of them, by mechanical means of course; they will become useless and empty, and then the young will die naturally, deprived of any and all sources of nourishment.”

“There’s formula,” Cynthia said, witheringly. “Similac and those. I’m going to change so we can go out.” She turned and strode toward their bedroom.

“You know,” Ian said after her, “if there was any way you could get me classified as a pre-person, you’d send me there. To the Facility with the greatest facility.” And, he thought, I’ll bet I wouldn’t be the only husband in California who went. There’d be plenty others. In the same bag as me, then as now.

“Sounds like a plan,” Cynthia’s voice came to him dimly; she had heard.

“It’s not just a hatred for the helpless,” Ian Best said. “More is involved. Hatred of what? Of everything that grows?” You blight them, he thought, before they grow big enough to have muscle and the tactics and skill for fight — big like I am in relation to you, with my fully developed musculature and weight. So much easier when the other person — I should say pre-person — is floating and dreaming in the amniotic fluid and knows nothing about how to nor the need to hit back.

Where did the motherly virtues go to? he asked himself. When mothers *especially* protected what was small and weak and defenseless?

Our competitive society, he decided. The survival of the strong. Not the fit, he thought; just those who hold the *power.* And are not going to surrender it to the next generation: it is the powerful and evil old against the helpless and gentle new.

“Dad,” Walter said, “are we really going to Vancouver Island in Canada and raise real food and not have anything to be afraid of any more?”

Half to himself, Ian said, “Soon as I have the money.”

“I know what that means. It’s a ‘we’ll see’ number you say. We aren’t going, are we?” He watched his father’s face intently. “She won’t let us, like taking me out of school and like that; she always brings up that… right?”

“It lies ahead for us someday,” Ian said doggedly. “Maybe not this month but someday, sometime. I promise.”

“And there’s no abortion trucks there.”

“No. None. Canadian law is different.”

“Make it soon, Dad. Please.”

His father fixed himself a second Scotch and milk and did not answer; his face was somber and unhappy, almost as if he was about to cry.

In the rear of the abortion truck three children and one adult huddled, jostled by the turning of the truck. They fell against the restraining wire that separated them, and Tim Gantro’s father felt keen despair at being cut off mechanically from his own boy. A nightmare during day, he thought. Caged like animals; his noble gesture had brought only more suffering to him.

“Why’d you say you don’t know algebra?” Tim asked, once. “I know you know even calculus and trig-something; you went to Stanford University.”

“I want to show,” he said, “that either they ought to kill all of us or none of us. But not divide along these bureaucratic arbitrary lines. ‘When does the soul enter the body?’ What kind of rational question is that in this day and age? It’s Medieval.” In fact, he thought, it’s a pretext — a pretext to prey on the helpless. And he was not helpless. The abortion truck had picked up a fully grown man, with all his knowledge, all his cunning. How are they going to handle me? he asked himself. Obviously I have what all men have; if they have souls, then so do I. If not, then I don’t, but on what real basis can they “put me to sleep”? I am not weak and small, not an ignorant child cowering defenselessly. I can argue the sophistries with the best of the county lawyers; with the D.A. himself, if necessary.

If they snuff me, he thought, they will have to snuff everyone, including themselves. And that is not what this is all about. This is a con game by which the established, those who already hold all the key economic and political posts, keep the youngsters out of it — murder them if necessary. There is, he thought, in the land, a hatred by the old of the young, a hatred and a fear. So what will they do with me? I am in their age group, and I am caged up in the back of this abortion truck. I pose, he thought, a different kind of threat; I am one of them but on the other side, with stray dogs and cats and babies and infants. Let them figure it out; let a new St. Thomas Aquinas arise who can unravel this.

“All I know,” he said aloud, “is dividing and multiplying and subtracting. I’m even hazy on my fractions.”

“But you used to know that!” Tim said.

“Funny how you forget it after you leave school,” Ed Gantro said. “You kids are probably better at it than I am.”

“Dad, they’re going to *snuff* you,” his son Tim said, wildly. “Nobody’ll adopt you. Not at your age. You’re too *old*.”

“Let’s see,” Ed Gantro said. “The binomial theorem. How does that go? I can’t get it all together: something about a and b.” And as it leaked out of his head, as had his immortal soul… he chuckled to himself. I cannot pass the soul test, he thought. At least not talking like that. I am a dog in the gutter, an animal in a ditch.

The whole mistake of the pro-abortion people from the start, he said to himself, was the *arbitrary* line they drew. An embryo is not entitled to American Constitutional rights and can be killed, legally, by a doctor. But a fetus was a “person,” with rights, at least for a while; and then the pro-abortion crowd decided that even a seven-month fetus was not “human” and could be killed, legally, by a licensed doctor. And, one day, a newborn baby — it is a vegetable; it can’t focus its eyes, it understands nothing, nor talks… the pro-abortion lobby argued in court, and won, with their contention that a newborn baby was only a fetus expelled by accident or organic processes from the womb. But, even then, where was the line to be drawn finally? When the baby smiled its first smile? When it spoke its first word or reached for its initial time for a toy it enjoyed? The legal line was relentlessly pushed back and back. And now the most savage and arbitrary definition of all: when it could perform “higher math.”

That made the ancient Greeks, of Plato’s time, nonhumans, since arithmetic was unknown to them, only geometry; and algebra was an Arab invention, much later in history. *Arbitrary.* It was not a theological arbitrariness either; it was a mere legal one. The Church had long since — from the start, in fact — maintained that even the zygote, and the embryo that followed, was as sacred a life form as any that walked the earth. They had seen what would come of arbitrary definitions of “Now the soul enters the body,” or in modern terms, “Now it is a person entitled to the full protection of the law like everyone else.” What was so sad was the sight now of the small child playing bravely in his yard day by day, trying to hope, trying to pretend a security he did not have.

Well, he thought, we'll see what they do with me; I am thirty-five years old, with a Master's Degree from Stanford. Will they put me in a cage for thirty days, with a plastic food dish and a water source and a place — in plain sight — to relieve myself, and if no one adopts me will they consign me to automatic death along with the others?

I am risking a lot, he thought. But they picked up my son today, and the risk began then, when they had him, not when I stepped forward and became a victim myself.

He looked about at the three frightened boys and tried to think of something to tell them — not just his own son but all three.

" 'Look,' " he said, quoting. " 'I tell you a sacred secret. We shall not all sleep in death. We shall —' " But then he could not remember the rest. Bummer, he thought dismally. " 'We shall wake up,' " he said, doing the best he could. " 'In a flash. In the twinkling of an eye.' "

"Cut the noise," the driver of the truck, from beyond his wire mesh, growled. "I can't concentrate on this fucking road." He added, "You know, I can squirt gas back there where you are, and you'll pass out; it's for obstreperous pre-persons we pick up. So you want to knock it off, or have me punch the gas button?"

"We won't say anything," Tim said quickly, with a look of mute terrified appeal at his father. Urging him silently to conform.

His father said nothing. The glance of urgent pleading was too much for him, and he capitulated. Anyhow, he reasoned, what happened in the truck was not crucial. It was when they reached the County Facility — where there would be, at the first sign of trouble, newspaper and TV reporters.

So they rode in silence, each with his own fears, his own schemes. Ed Gantro brooded to himself, perfecting in his head what he would do — what he *had* to do. And not just for Tim but all the P.P. abortion candidates; he thought through the ramifications as the truck lurched and rattled on.

As soon as the truck parked in the restricted lot of the County Facility and its rear doors had been swung open, Sam B. Carpenter, who ran the whole goddamn operation, walked over, stared, said, “You’ve got a grown man in there, Ferris. In fact, you comprehend what you’ve got? A protester, that’s what you’ve latched onto.”

“But he insisted he doesn’t know any math higher than adding,” Ferris said.

To Ed Gantro, Carpenter said, “Hand me your wallet. I want your actual name. Social Security number, police region stability ident — come on, I want to know who you really are.”

“He’s just a rural type,” Ferris said, as he watched Gantro pass over his lumpy wallet.

“And I want confirm prints offa his feet,” Carpenter said. “The full set. Right away — priority A.” He liked to talk that way.

An hour later he had the reports back from the jungle of interlocking security-data computers from the fake-pastoral restricted area in Virginia. “This individual graduated from Stanford College with a degree in math. And then got a master’s in psychology, which he has, no doubt about it, been subjecting us to. We’ve got to get him out of here.”

“I did have a soul,” Gantro said, “but I lost it.”

“How?” Carpenter demanded, seeing nothing about that on Gantro’s official records.

“An embolism. The portion of my cerebral cortex, where my soul was, got destroyed when I accidentally inhaled the vapors of insect spray. That’s why I’ve been living out in the country eating roots and grubs, with my boy here, Tim.”

“We’ll run an EEG on you,” Carpenter said.

“What’s that?” Gantro said. “One of those brain tests?”

To Ferris, Carpenter said. “The law says the soul enters at twelve years. And you bring this individual male adult well over thirty. We could be charged with murder. We’ve got to get rid of him. You drive him back to exactly where you found him and dump him off. If he won’t voluntarily exit from the truck, gas the shit out of him and then throw him out. That’s a national security order. Your job depends on it, also your status with the penal code of this state.”

“I belong here,” Ed Gantro said. “I’m a dummy.”

“And his kid,” Carpenter said. “He’s probably a mathematical mental mutant like you see on TV. They set you up; they’ve probably already alerted the media. Take them all back and gas them and dump them wherever you found them or, barring that, anyhow out of sight.”

“You’re getting hysterical,” Ferris said, with anger. “Run the EEG and the brain scan on Gantro, and probably we’ll have to release him, but these three juveniles —”

“All genuises,” Carpenter said. “All part of the setup, only you’re too stupid to know. Kick them out of the truck and off our premises, and deny — you get this? — deny you ever picked any of the four of them up. Stick to that story.”

“Out of the vehicle,” Ferris ordered, pressing the button that lifted the wire mesh gates.

The three boys scrambled out. But Ed Gantro remained.

“He’s not going to exit voluntarily,” Carpenter said. “Okay, Gantro, we’ll physically expel you.” He nodded to Ferris, and the two of them entered the back of the truck. A moment later they had deposited Ed Gantro on the pavement of the parking lot.

“Now you’re just a plain citizen,” Carpenter said, with relief. “You can claim all you want, but you have no proof.”

“Dad,” Tim said, “how are we going to get home?” All three boys clustered around Ed Gantro.

“You could call somebody from up there,” the Fleischhacker boy said. “I bet if Walter Best’s dad has enough gas he’d come and get us. He takes a lot of long drives; he has a special coupon.”

“Him and his wife, Mrs. Best, quarrel a lot,” Tim said. “So he likes to go driving at night alone; I mean, without her.”

Ed Gantro said, “I’m staying here. I want to be locked up in a cage.”

“But we can *go*,” Tim protested. Urgently, he plucked at his dad’s sleeve. “That’s the whole point, isn’t it? They let us go when they saw you. We did it!”

Ed Gantro said to Carpenter, “I insist on being locked up with the other pre-persons you have in there.” He pointed at the gaily imposing, esthetic solid-green-painted Facility Building.

To Mr. Sam B. Carpenter, Tim said, “Call Mr. Best, out where we were, on the peninsula. It’s a 669 prefix number. Tell him to come and get us, and he will. I promise. Please.”

The Fleischhacker boy added, “There’s only one Mr. Best listed in the phone book with a 669 number. Please, mister.”

Carpenter went indoors, to one of the Facility's many official phones, looked up the number. Ian Best. He punched the number.

"You have reached a semiworking, semiloafing number," a man's voice, obviously that of someone half-drunk, responded. In the background Carpenter could hear the cutting tones of a furious woman, excoriating Ian Best.

"Mr. Best," Carpenter said, "several persons whom you know are stranded down at Fourth and A Streets in Verde Gabriel, an Ed Gantro and his son, Tim, a boy identified as Ronald or Donald Fleischhacker, and another unidentified minor boy. The Gantro boy suggested you would not object to driving down here to pick them up and take them home."

"Fourth and A Streets," Ian Best said. A pause. "Is that the pound?"

"The County Facility," Carpenter said.

"You son of a bitch," Best said. "Sure I'll come get them; expect me in twenty minutes. You have *Ed* Gantro there as a pre-person? Do you know he graduated from Stanford University?"

"We are aware of this," Carpenter said stonily. "But they are not being detained; they are merely — here. Not — I repeat not — in custody."

Ian Best, the drunken slur gone from his voice, said, "There'll be reporters from all the media there before I get there." Click. He had hung up.

Walking back outside, Carpenter said to the boy Tim, "Well, it seems you mickey-moused me into notifying a rabid anti-abortionist activist of your presence here. How neat, how really neat."

A few moments passed, and then a bright-red Mazda sped up to the entrance of the Facility. A tall man with a light beard got out, unwound

camera and audio gear, walked leisurely over to Carpenter. “I understand you may have a Stanford MA in math here at the Facility,” he said in a neutral, casual voice. “Could I interview him for a possible story?”

Carpenter said, “We have booked no such person. You can inspect our records.” But the reporter was already gazing at the three boys clustered around Ed Gantro.

In a loud voice the reporter called, “Mr. Gantro?”

“Yes, sir,” Ed Gantro replied.

Christ, Carpenter thought. We did lock him in one of our official vehicles and transport him here; it’ll hit all the papers. Already a blue van with the markings of a TV station had rolled onto the lot. And, behind it, two more cars.

ABORTION FACILITY SNUFFS

STANFORD GRAD

That was how it read in Carpenter’s mind. Or

COUNTY ABORTION FACILITY

FOILED IN ILLEGAL ATTEMPT TO…

And so forth. A spot on the 6:00 evening TV news. Gantro, and when he showed up, Ian Best who was probably an attorney, surrounded by tape recorders and mikes and video cameras.

We have mortally fucked up, he thought. Mortally fucked up. They at Sacramento will cut our appropriation; we’ll be reduced to hunting down stray dogs and cats again, like before. Bummer.

When Ian Best arrived in his coal-burning Mercedes-Benz, he was still a little stoned. To Ed Gantro he said, “You mind if we take a scenic

roundabout route back?”

“By way of what?” Ed Gantro said. He wearily wanted to leave now. The little flow of media people had interviewed him and gone. He had made his point, and now he felt drained, and he wanted to go home.

Ian Best said, “By way of Vancouver Island, British Columbia.”

With a smile, Ed Gantro said, “These kids should go right to bed. My kid and the other two. Hell, they haven’t even had any dinner.”

“We’ll stop at a McDonald’s stand,” Ian Best said. “And then we can take off for Canada, where the fish are, and lots of mountains that still have snow on them, even this time of year.”

“Sure,” Gantro said, grinning. “We can go there.”

“You want to?” Ian Best scrutinized him. “You really want to?”

“I’ll settle a few things, and then, sure, you and I can take off together.”

“Son of a bitch,” Best breathed. “You mean it.”

“Yes,” he said. “I do. Of course, I have to get my wife’s agreement. You can’t go to Canada unless your wife signs a document in writing where she won’t follow you. You become what’s called a ‘landed Immigrant.’ “

“Then I’ve got to get Cynthia’s written permission.”

“She’ll give it to you. Just agree to send support money.”

“You think she will? She’ll let me go?”

“Of course,” Gantro said.

“You actually think our wives will let us go,” Ian Best said as he and Gantro herded the children into the Mercedes-Benz. “I’ll bet you’re right; Cynthia’d love to get rid of me. You know what she calls me, right in front of Walter? ‘An aggressive coward,’ and stuff like that. She has no respect for me.”

“Our wives,” Gantro said, “will let us go.” But he knew better.

He looked back at the Facility manager, Mr. Sam B. Carpenter, and at the truck driver, Ferris, who, Carpenter had told the press and TV, was as of this date fired and was a new and inexperienced employee anyhow.

“No,” he said. “They won’t let us go. None of them will.”

Clumsily, Ian Best fiddled with the complex mechanism that controlled the funky coal-burning engine. “Sure they’ll let us go; look, they’re just standing there. What can they do, after what you said on TV and what that one reporter wrote up for a feature story?”

“I don’t mean them,” Gantro said tonelessly.

“We could just run.”

“We are caught,” Gantro said. “Caught and can’t get out. You ask Cynthia, though. It’s worth a try.”

“We’ll never see Vancouver Island and the great ocean-going ferries steaming in and out of the fog, will we?” Ian Best said.

“Sure we will, eventually.” But he knew it was a lie, an absolute lie, just like you know sometimes when you say something that for no rational reason you know is absolutely true.

They drove from the lot, out onto the public street.

"It feels good," Ian Best said, "to be free… right?" The three boys nodded, but Ed Gantro said nothing. Free, he thought. Free to go home. To be caught in a larger net, shoved into a greater truck than the metal mechanical one the County Facility uses.

"This is a great day," Ian Best said.

"Yes," Ed Gantro agreed. "A great day in which a noble and effective blow has been struck for all helpless things, anything of which you could say, 'It is alive.' "

Regarding him intently in the narrow trickly light, Ian Best said, "I don't want to go home; I want to take off for Canada now."

"We *have* to go home," Ed Gantro reminded him. "Temporarily, I mean. To wind things up. Legal matters, pick up what we need."

Ian Best, as he drove, said, "We'll never get there, to British Columbia and Vancouver Island and Stanley Park and English Bay and where they grow food and keep horses and where they have the ocean-going ferries."

"No, we won't," Ed Gantro said.

"Not now, not even later?"

"Not ever," Ed Gantro said.

"That's what I was afraid of," Best said and his voice broke and his driving got funny. "That's what I thought from the beginning."

They drove in silence, then, with nothing to say to each other. There was nothing left to say.

The Eye of the Sibyl

How is it that our ancient Roman Republic guards itself against those who would destroy it? We Romans, although only mortals like other mortals, draw on the help of beings enormously superior to ourselves. These wise and kind entities, who originate from worlds unknown to us, are ready to assist the Republic when it is in peril. When it is not in peril, they sink back out of sight — to return when we need them.

Take the case of the assassination of Julius Caesar: a case which apparently was closed when those who conspired to murder him were themselves murdered. But how did we Romans determine who had done this foul deed? And, more important, how did we bring these conspirators to justice? We had outside help; we had the assistance of the Cumean Sibyl who knows a thousand years ahead what will happen, and who gives us, in written form, her advice. All Romans are aware of the existence of the Sibylline Books. We open them whenever the need arises.

I myself, Philos Diktos of Tyana, have seen the Sibylline Books. Many leading Roman citizens, members of the Senate especially, have consulted them. But I have seen the Sibyl herself, and I of my own experience know something about her which few men know. Now that I am old — regretfully, but of the necessity which binds all mortal men — I am willing to confess that once, quite by accident I suppose, I in the course of my priestly duties saw how the Sibyl is capable of seeing down the corridors of time; I know what permits her to do this, as she developed out of the prior Greek Sibyl at Delphi, in that so highly venerated land, Greece.

Few men know this, and perhaps the Sibyl, reaching out through time to strike at me for speaking aloud, will silence me forever. It is quite possible, therefore, that before I can finish this scroll I will be found dead, my head split like one of those overripe melons from the Levant which we Romans prize so. In any case, being old, I will boldly say.

I had been quarreling with my wife that morning — I was not old then, and the dreadful murder of Julius Caesar had just taken place. At that time no one was sure who had done it. Treason against the State! Murder most ugly — a thousand knife wounds in the body of the man who had come to stabilize our quaking society… with the approval of the Sibyl, in her temple; we had seen the texts she had written to that effect. We knew that she had expected Caesar to bring his army across the river and into Rome, and to accept the crown of Caesar.

"You witless fool," my wife was saying to me that morning. "If the Sibyl were so wise as you think, she would have anticipated this assassination."

"Maybe she did," I answered.

"I think she's a fake," my wife Xantippe said to me, grimacing in that way she has, which is so repulsive. She is — I should say was — of a higher social class than I, and always made me conscious of it. "You priests make up those texts; you write them yourselves — you say what you think in such a vague way that any interpretation can be made of it. You're bilking the citizens, especially the well-to-do." By that she meant her own family.

I said hotly, leaping up from the breakfast table, "She is inspired; she is a prophetess — she knows the future. Evidently there was no way the assassination of our great leader, whom the people loved so, could be averted."

"The Sibyl is a hoax," my wife said, and started buttering yet another roll, in her usual greedy fashion.

"I have seen the great books —"

"*How* does she know the future?" my wife demanded. At that I had to admit I didn't know; I was crestfallen — I, a priest at Cumae, an employee of the Roman State. I felt humiliated.

"It's a money game," my wife was saying as I strode out the door. Even though it was only dawn — fair Aurora, the goddess of dawn, was showing that white light over the world, the light we regard as sacred, from which many of our inspired visions come — I made my way, on foot, to the lovely temple where I work.

No one else had arrived yet, except the armed guards loitering outside; they glanced at me in surprise to see me so early, then nodded as they recognized me. No one but a recognized priest of the temple at Cumae is allowed in; even Caesar himself must depend on us.

Entering, I passed by the great gas-filled vault in which the Sibyl's huge stone throne shone wetly in the half-gloom; only a few meager torches had been lit…

I halted and froze into silence, as I saw something never disclosed to me before. The Sibyl, her long black hair tied up in a tight knot, her arms covered, sat on her throne, leaning forward — and I saw, then, that she was not alone.

Two creatures stood before her, inside a round bubble. They resembled men but each of them had an additional — I am not sure even now what they had, but they were not mortals. They were gods. They had slits for eyes, without pupils. Instead of hands, they had claws like a crab has. Their mouths were only holes, and I realized that they, gods forbid, were mute. They seemed to be talking to the Sibyl but over a long string, at each end of which was a box. One of the creatures held the box to the side of his head, and the Sibyl listened to the box at her end. The box had numbers on it and buttons, and the string was in rolls and heaps, so that it could be extended.

These were the Immortals. But we Romans, we mortals, had believed that all the Immortals had left the world, a long time ago. That was what we

had been told. Evidently they had returned — at least for a short while, and to give information to the Sibyl.

The Sibyl turned toward me, and, incredibly, her head came across that whole gas-filled chamber until it was close to mine. She was smiling, but she had found me out. Now I could hear the conversation between her and the Immortals; she graciously made it audible to me.

"… only one of many," the larger of the two Immortals was saying. "More will follow, but not for some time. The darkness of ignorance is coming, after a golden period."

"There is no way it can be averted?" the Sibyl asked, in that melodious voice of hers which we treasure so.

"Augustus will reign well," the larger Immortal said, "but following him evil and deranged men will come."

The other Immortal said, "You must understand that a new cult will arise around a Light Creature. The cult will grow, but their true texts will be encoded, and the actual messages lost. We foresee failure for the mission of the Light Creature; he will be tortured and murdered, as was Julius. And after that —"

"Long after that," the larger Immortal said, "civilization will draw itself up out of the ignorance once more, after two thousand years, and then —"

The Sibyl gasped and said, "That long, Fathers?"

"That long. And then as they begin to question and to seek to learn their true origins, their divinity, the murders will begin again, the repression and cruelty, and another dark age will begin."

"It might be averted," the other Immortal said.

“Can I assist?” the Sibyl asked.

Gently, both Immortals said, “You will be dead by then.”

“There will be no sibyl to take my place?”

“None. No one will guard the Republic two thousand years from now. And filthy men with small ideas will scamper and scrabble about like rats; their footprints will crisscross the world as they seek power and vie with one another for false honors.” To the Sibyl both Immortals said, “You will not be able to help the people, then.”

Abruptly both Immortals vanished, along with their rolls of string and the boxes with numbers which talked and were talked into, as if by mind alone. The Sibyl sat for a moment, and then lifted her hands so that by means of the mechanism which the Egyptians taught us, one of the blank pages lifted toward her, that she might write. But then she did a curious thing, and it is this which I tell you with fear, more fear than what I have told already.

Reaching into the folds of her robe she brought out an Eye. She placed the eye in the center of her forehead, and it was not an eye at all such as ours, with a pupil, but like that, the slit-like eye of the Immortals, and yet not. It had sideways bands which moved toward one another, like rows… I have no words for this, being only a priest by formal training and class, but the Sibyl did turn toward me and look *past* me with that Eye, and she did then cry out so loud that it shook the walls of the temple; stones fell and the snakes far down in the slots of rock hissed. She cried in dismay and horror at what she saw, past me, and yet her strange third eye remained; she continued to look.

And then she fell, as if faint. I ran forward to lend a hand; I touched the Sibyl, my friend, that great lovely friend of the Republic as she fell faint and forward in dismay at what she saw ahead, down the tunnels and corridors of time. For it was this Eye by which the Sibyl saw what she needed to see, to instruct and warn us. And it was evident to me that

sometimes she saw things too dreadful for her to bear, and for us to handle, try as we might.

As I held the Sibyl, a strange thing happened. I saw, amid the swirling gases, forms take shape.

"You must not take them as real," the Sibyl said; I heard her voice, and yet although I understood her words I knew that the shapes were indeed real. I saw a giant ship, without sails or oars… I saw a city of thin, high buildings, crowded with vehicles unlike anything I had ever seen. And still I moved toward them and they toward me, until at last the shapes swirled behind me, cutting me off from the Sibyl. "I see this with the Gorgon's Eye," the Sibyl called after me. "It is the Eye which Medusas passed back and forth, the eye of the fates — you have fallen into —" And then her words were gone.

I played in grass with a puppy, wondering about a broken Coca-Cola bottle which had been left in our backyard; I didn't know by whom.

"Philip, you come in for dinner!" my grandmother called from the back porch. I saw that the sun was setting.

"Okay!" I called back. But I continued to play. I had found a great spider web, and in it was a bee wrapped up in web, stung by the spider. I began to unwrap it, and it stung me.

My next memory was reading the comic pages in the Berkeley Daily Gazette. I read about Brick Bradford and how he found a lost civilization from thousands of years ago.

"Hey, Mom," I said to my mother. "Look at this; it's swell. Brick walks down this ledge, see, and at the bottom —" I kept staring at the olden-times helmets the people wore, and a strange feeling filled me; I didn't know why.

“He certainly gets a lot out of the funnies,” my grandmother said in a disgusted voice. “He should read something worthwhile. Those comics are garbage.”

The next I remember I was in school, sitting watching a girl dance. Her name was Jill and she was from the grade above ours, the sixth; she wore a belly dancer’s costume and her veil covered the bottom part of her face. But I could see lovely kind eyes, eyes filled with wisdom. They reminded me of someone else’s eyes I had once known, but who has a kid ever known? Later Mrs. Redman had us write a composition, and I wrote about Jill. I wrote about strange lands where Jill lived where she danced with nothing on above her waist. Later, Mrs. Redman talked to my mother on the phone and I was bawled out, but in obscure terms that had to do with a bra or something. I never understood it then; there was a lot I didn’t understand. I seemed to have memories, and yet they had nothing to do with growing up in Berkeley at the Hillside Grammar School, or my family, or the house we lived in… they had to do with snakes. I know now why I dreamed of snakes: wise snakes, not evil snakes but those which whisper wisdom.

Anyhow, my composition was considered very good by the principal of the school, Mr. Bill Gaines, *after* I wrote in that Jill wore something above her waist at all times, and later I decided to be a writer.

One night I had an odd dream. I was maybe in junior high school, getting ready to go to Berkeley High next year. I dreamed that in the deep of night — and it was like a regular dream, it was really real — I saw this person from outer space behind glass in a satellite of some kind they’d come here in. And he couldn’t talk; he just looked at me, with funny eyes.

Two weeks or so later I had to fill out what I wanted to be when I grew up and I thought of my dream about the man from another universe, so I wrote: I AM GOING TO BE A SCIENCE FICTION WRITER.

That made my family mad, but then, see, when they got mad I got stubborn, and anyhow my girlfriend, Ysabel Lomax, told me I’d never be any good at it and it didn’t earn any money anyhow and science fiction was dumb and only people with pimples read it. So I decided for sure to write it, because people with pimples should have someone writing for them; it’s

unfair otherwise, just to write for people with clear complexions. America is built on fairness; that is what Mr. Gaines taught us at Hillside Grammar School, and since he was able to fix my wristwatch that time when no one else could, I tend to admire him.

In high school I was a failure because I just sat writing and writing all day, and all my teachers screamed at me that I was a Communist because I didn't do what I was told.

"Oh yeah?" I used to say. That got me sent up before the Dean of Boys. He told me off worse than my grandfather had, and warned me that if I didn't get better grades I'd be expelled.

That night I had another one of those vivid dreams. This time a woman was driving me in her car, only it was like an old-time Roman style chariot, and she was singing.

The next day when I had to go see Mr. Erlaud, the Dean of Boys, I wrote on his blackboard, in Latin:

UBI PECUNIA REGNET

When he came in he turned red in the face, since he teaches Latin and knows that means, "Where money rules."

"This is what a left-wing complainer would write," he said to me. So I wrote something else as he sat looking over my papers; I wrote:

UBI CUNNUS REGNET

That seemed to perplex him. "Where — did you learn that particular Latin word?" he asked.

"I don't know," I said. I wasn't sure, but it seemed to me that in my dreams they were talking to me in Latin. Maybe it was just my own brain doing reruns of my Latin 1-A beginners class, where I was really very good, surprisingly, because I didn't study.

The next vivid dream like that came two nights before that freak or those freaks killed President Kennedy. I saw the whole thing happening in my dream, *two nights before*, but more than anything else, even more vivid, I saw my girlfriend Ysabel Lomax watching the conspirators doing their evil deed, and Ysabel had a third eye.

My folks sent me to a psychologist later on, because after President Kennedy was assassinated I got really weird. I just sat and brooded and withdrew. It was a neat lady they sent me to, a Carol Heims. She was very pretty and she didn't say I was nuts; she said I should get away from my family, drop out of school — she said that the school system insulates you from reality and keeps you from learning techniques to handle actual situations — and for me to write science fiction.

I did so. I worked at a TV sales shop sweeping up and uncrating and setting up the new TV sets. I kept thinking that each set was like a huge eye, though; it bothered me. I told Carol Heims my dreams that I had been having all my life, about the space people, and being in Latin, and that I thought I'd had a lot more I'd never remembered when I woke up.

"Dreams aren't fully understood," Ms. Heims told me. I was sitting there wondering how she would look in a belly dancer costume, nude above the waist; I found that made the therapy hour go faster. "There's a new theory that it's part of your collective unconscious, reaching back perhaps thousands of years… and in dreams you get in touch with it. So, if that's true, dreams are valid and very valuable."

I was busy imagining her hips moving suggestively from side to side, but I did listen to what she said; it was something about the wise kindness of her eyes. Always I thought of those wise snakes, for some reason.

"I've been dreaming about books," I told her. "Open books, held up before me. Huge books, very valuable. Even holy, like the Bible."

“That has to do with your career as a writer,” Ms. Heims said.

“These are old. Thousands of years old. And they’re warning us about something. A dreadful murder, a lot of murders. And cops putting people into prison for their ideas, but doing it secretly — framing people. And I keep seeing this woman who looks like you but seated on a vast stone throne.”

Later on Ms. Heims was transferred to another part of the county and I couldn’t see her any more. I felt really bad, and I buried myself in my writing. I sold a story to a magazine called *Envigorating Science Fact*, which told about superior races who had landed on Earth and were directing our affairs secretly. They never paid me.

I am old now, and I risk telling this, because what do I have to lose? One day I got a request to write a small article for *Love-Planet Adventure Yarns*, and they gave me a plot they wanted written up, and a black-and-white photo of the cover. I kept staring at the photo; it showed a Roman or Greek — anyhow he wore a toga — and he had on his wrist a caduceus, which is the medical sign: two coiled snakes, only actually it was olive branches originally.

“How do you know that’s called a ‘caduceus’?” Ysabel asked me (we were living together now, and she was always telling me to make more money and to be like her family, which was well-to-do and classy).

“I don’t know,” I said, and I felt funny. And then I began to see violently agitated colored phosphene activity in both my eyes, like those modern abstract graphics which Paul Klee and others draw — in vivid color, and flash-cut in duration: very fast. “What’s the date?” I yelled at Ysabel, who was sitting drying her hair and reading the *Harvard Lampoon.*

“The date? It’s March 16,” she said.

“The *year*!” I yelled. “Pulchra puella, tempus —” And then I broke off, because she was staring at me. And, worse, I couldn’t recall her name or

who she was.

“It is 1974,” she answered.

“The tyranny is in power, then, if it is only 1974,” I said.

“What?” she answered, astonished, staring at me.

At once two beings appeared on each side of her, encapsulated in their intersystem vessels, two globes which hovered and maintained their atmosphere and temperature. “Don’t say a further statement to her,” one of them warned me. “We will erase her memory; she will think she fell asleep and had a dream.”

“I remember,” I said, pressing my hands to my head. Anamnesis had taken place; I remember that I was from ancient times, and, before that, from the star Albemuth, as were these two Immortals. “Why are you back?” I said. “To —”

“We shall work entirely through ordinary mortals,” J’Annis said. He was the wiser of the two Immortals. “There is no Sibyl now to help, to give advice to the Republic. In dreams we are inspiring people here and there to *wake up*; they are beginning to understand that the Price of Release is being paid by us to free them from the Liar, who rules them.”

“They’re not aware of you?” I said.

“They suspect. They see holograms of us projected in the sky, which we employ to divert them; they imagine that we are floating about there.”

I knew that these Immortals were in the minds of men, not in the skies of Earth, that by diverting attention outward, they were free once more to help inward, as they had always helped: the inner World.

“We will bring the springtime to this winter world,” F’fr’am said, smiling. “We will raise the gates which imprison these people, who groan under a tyranny they dimly see. *Did* you see? Did you know of the comings-and-goings of the secret police, the quasi-military teams which destroyed all freedom of speech, all those who dissented?”

Now, in my old age, I set forth this account for you, my Roman friends, here at Cumae, where the Sibyl lives. I passed either by chance or by design into the far future, into a world of tyranny, of winter, which you cannot imagine. And I saw the Immortals which assist us also assist those, two thousand years from now! Although those mortals in the future are — listen to me — *blind.* Their sight has been taken away by a thousand years of repression; they have been tormented and limited, the way we limit animals. But the Immortals are waking them up — *will* wake them up, I should say, in time to save them. And then the two thousand years of winter will end; they will open their eyes, because of dreams and secret inspirations; they will know — but I have told you all this, in my ancient, rambling fashion.

Let me finish with this verse by our great poet Virgil, a good friend of the Sibyl, and you will know from it what lies ahead, for the Sibyl has said that although it will not apply to our time here in Rome, it will apply to those two thousand years from us, ahead in time, bringing them promise of relief:

“Ultima Cumaei venit iam carminis aetas;

magnus ab integro saeclorum nascitur ordo.

Iam redit et Virgo, redeunt Saturnia regna;

Iam nova progenies, caelo demittitur alto.

Tu modo nascenti puero, quo ferrea primum

desinet, ac toto surget gens aurea mundo,

casta fave Lucina; tuus iam regnat Apollo.”

I will set this in the strange English language which I learned to speak during my time in the future, before the Immortals and the Sibyl drew me back here, my work there at that time done:

“At last the Final Time announced by the Sibyl will arrive:

The procession of ages turns to its origin.

The Virgin returns and Saturn reigns as before;

A new race from heaven on high descends.

Goddess of Birth, smile on the newborn baby,

In whose time the Iron Prison will fall to ruin

And a golden race arises everywhere.

Apollo, the rightful king, is restored!”

Alas, you my dear Roman friends will not live to see this. But far along the corridors of time, in the United States (I use here words foreign to you) evil will fall, and this little prophecy of Virgil, which the Sibyl inspired in him, will come true. The Springtime is reborn!

The Day Mr. Computer Fell out of its Tree

He awoke, and sensed at once that something dreadful was wrong. Oh God, he thought as he realized that Mr. Bed had deposited him in a muddled heap against the wall. It's beginning again, he realized. And the Directorate West promised us infinite perfection. This is what we get, he realized, for believing in what mere humans say.

As best he could he struggled out of his bedclothes, got shakily to his feet and made his way across the room to Mr. Closet.

"I'd like a natty sharkskin gray double-breasted suit," he informed it, speaking crisply into the microphone on Mr. Closet's door. "A red shirt, blue socks, and —" But it was no use. Already the slot was vibrating as a huge pair of women's silk bloomers came sliding out.

"You get what you see," Mr. Closet's metallic voice came to him, echoing hollowly.

Glumly, Joe Contemptible put on the bloomers. At least it was better than nothing — like the day in Dreadful August when the vast polyencephalic computer in Queens had served up everyone in Greater America nothing but a handkerchief to wear.

Going to the bathroom, Joe Contemptible washed his face — and found the liquid which he was splashing on himself to be warm root beer. Christ, he thought. Mr. Computer is even zanier this time than ever before. It's been reading old Phil Dick science fiction stories, he decided. That's what we get for providing Mr. Computer with every kind of archaic trash in the world to read and store in its memory banks.

He finished combing his hair — without making use of the root beer — and then, having dried himself, entered the kitchen to see if Mr. Coffeepot

was at least a sane fragment in a reality deteriorating all around him.

No luck. Mr. Coffeepot obligingly presented him with a dixie cup of soap. Well, so much for that.

The real problem, however, came when he tried to open Mr. Door. Mr. Door would not open; instead it complained tinnily: “The paths of glory lead but to the grave.”

“Meaning what?” Joe demanded, angry, now. This weird business was no longer fun. Not that it had ever been the times before — except, perhaps, when Mr. Computer had served him with roast pheasant for breakfast.

“Meaning,” Mr. Door said, “that you’re wasting your time, fucker. You’re not getting to the office today nohow.”

This proved to be true. The door would not open; despite his efforts the mechanism, controlled miles away from the polyencephalic master matrix, refused to budge.

Breakfast, then? Joe Contemptible punched buttons on the control module of Mr. Food — and found himself staring at a plate of fertilizer.

He thereupon picked up the phone and savagely attacked the numbers which would put him in touch with the local police.

“Loony Tunes Incorporated,” the face on the vidscreen said. “An animated cartoon version of your sexual practices produced in one week, including GLORIOUS SOUND EFFECTS !”

Fuck it, Joe Contemptible said to himself and rang off.

It had been a bad idea from the start, back in 1982, to operate every mechanism from a central source. Of course, the basic idea had sounded good: with the ozone layer burned off, too many people were behaving

irrationally, and it had become necessary to solve the problem by some electronic means immune from the mind-slushing ultra violet radiation now flooding earth. Mr. Computer had, at the time, seemed to be the answer. But, sad to say, Mr. Computer had absorbed too much freaked-out input from its human builders and therefore, like them, Mr. Computer had its own psychotic episodes.

There was of course an answer. It had hurriedly been slapped together — pasted into place, as it were, once the difficulty was discovered. The head of World Mental Health, a formidable old battleax named Joan Simpson, had been granted a form of immortality so as to be always available to treat Mr. Computer during its crazy periods. Ms. Simpson was stored at the center of the earth in a special lead-lined chamber, safe from the harmful radiation at the surface, in a quasi-suspended animation called Dismal Pak, in which Ms. Simpson (it was said) lay aslumber while being entertained by an endless procession of priceless 1940 radio soap operas, fed to her on a closed loop. Ms. Simpson, it was said, was the only truly sane person on — or rather in — earth; this, plus her superb skill, as well as infinite training in the art of healing psychotic constructs, was earth's sole hope for survival.

Realizing this, Joe Contemptible felt a little better, but not a lot — for he had just picked up Mr. Newspaper where it lay on the floor beside the slot of his front door. The headline read:

ADOLF HITLER CROWNED POPE. CROWDS CHEER IN RECORD NUMBERS.

So much for Mr. Newspaper, Joe realized glumly, and tossed it into Mr. Garbage-slot. The mechanism churned, and then, instead of ingesting or cubing the newspaper, spat it back out again. Joe glanced briefly at the headline again, saw a photo of a human skeleton — complete with Nazi uniform and mustache, wearing the great crown of the pope — and seated himself on the couch in his living room to wait for the moment (sure to come soon) when Ms. Simpson was startled out of Dismal Pak to minister to Mr. Computer, and, in so doing, restore the world to sanity.

Half to himself, Fred Doubledome said, “It’s psychotic, all right. I asked it if it knew where it was and it said it was floating on a raft in the Mississippi. Now get a confirm for me; ask it who it is.”

Dr. Pacemaker touched command-request buttons on the console of the vast computer, asking it: WHO ARE YOU?

The answer appeared on the vidscreen at once.

TOM SAWYER

“You see?” Doubledome said. “It is totally out of touch with the reality situation. Has reactivation of Ms. Simpson begun?”

“That’s affirmative, Doubledome,” Pacemaker said. And, as if proving him correct, doors slid aside to reveal the lead-lined container in which Ms. Simpson slept, listening to her favorite daytime soap opera, Ma Perkins.

“Ms. Simpson,” Pacemaker said, bending over her. “We are having a problem with Mr. Computer again. It has totally spaced out. An hour ago it routed all the whipples in New York across the same intersection. Loss of life was heavy. And instead of responding to the disaster with fire and police rescue teams it dispatched a circus troop of clowns.”

“I see,” Ms. Simpson’s voice came through the transduction and boosting system by which they communicated with her. “But first, I must attend to a fire at Ma’s lumber yard. You see, her friend Shuffle —”

“Ms. Simpson,” Pacemaker said, “our situation is grave. We need you. Come out of your customary fog and get to work restoring Mr. Computer to sanity. Then you may return to your radio serials.”

Gazing down at Ms. Simpson he was, as always, startled by her virtually unnatural beauty. Great dark eyes with long lashes, the husky, sensuous voice, the intensely black short-cropped hair (so fashionable in a world of dreck!), the firm and supple body, the warm mouth suggesting love and comfort — amazing, he thought, that the one really sane human left on

earth (and the only one capable of saving same) could at the same time be startlingly lovely.

But no matter; this was not the time to think such thoughts. NBC TV news had already reported that Mr. Computer had closed down all the airports in the world and turned them into baseball stadiums.

Shortly, Ms. Simpson was studying a composite abstract delineating Mr. Computer's erratic commands.

"It is clearly regressive," she informed them, sipping absently at a cup of coffee.

"Ms. Simpson," Doubledome said, "I'm afraid that's soapy water you're drinking."

"You're right," Ms. Simpson said, putting the cup down. "I see here that Mr. Computer is playing childish pranks on the mass of mankind. It fits with my hypostatized hypothesis."

"How will you render a return of normalcy to the vast construct?" Pacemaker asked.

"Evidently it encountered a traumatic situation which caused it to regress," Ms. Simpson said. "I shall locate the trauma and then proceed by desensitizing Mr. Computer vis-à-vis that trauma. My M.O. in that regard will be to present Mr. Computer with each letter of the alphabet in turn, gauging its reactions until I perceive what we in the mental health movement call a flinch reaction."

She did so. Mr. Computer, upon the letter J, emitted a faint whine; smoke billowed up. Ms. Simpson then repeated the sequence of letters. This time the faint whine and billows of smoke came at the letter C.

“J.C.,” Ms. Simpson said. “Perhaps Jesus Christ. Perhaps the Second Coming has taken place, and Mr. Computer fears that it will be pre-empted. I will start on that assumption. Have Mr. Computer placed in a semi-comatose state so that it can free associate.”

Technicians hurried to the task assigned.

The virtually unconscious mumbling of the great computer issued forth from the aud channels mounted through the control chamber.

“… programming himself to die,” the computer rambled on. “Fine person like that. DNA command analysis. Going to ask not for a reprieve but for an acceleration of the death process. Salmon swimming upstream to die… appeals to him… after all I’ve done for him. Rejection of life. Conscious of it. Wants to die. I cannot endure the voluntary death, the reprogramming 180 degrees from the matrix purpose of DNA command programming…” On and on it rambled.

Ms. Simpson said sharply, “What name comes to you, Mr. Computer? A name!”

“Clerk in a record store,” the computer mumbled. “An authority on German Lieder and bubblegum rock of the ’60s. What a waste. My but the water is warm. Think I’ll fish. Let down my line and catch a big catfish. Won’t Huck be surprised, and Jim, too! Jim’s a man even though —”

“What name?” Ms. Simpson repeated.

The vague mumble continued.

Swiftly, Ms. Simpson said to Doubledome and Pacemaker, who stood rigid and attentive, “Find a record clerk whose initials are J.C. and who is an authority on German Lieder and bubblegum rock of the ’60s. And hurry! *We don’t have much time*!”

Having left his conapt by a window, Joe Contemptible made his way among wrecked whipples and shouting, angry drivers in the direction of Artistic Music Company, the record store at which he had worked most of his life. At least he had gotten out of —

Suddenly two gray-clad police materialized before him, faces grim; both held punch-guns aimed at Joe's chest. "You're coming with us," they said, virtually in unison.

The urge to run overcame Joe; turning, he started away. But then furious pain settled over him; the police had punched him out, and now, falling, he realized that it was too late to flee. He was a captive of the authorities. But why? he wondered. Is it merely a random sweep? Or are they putting down an abortive coup against the government? Or — his fading thoughts raced — have ETIs come at last to help us in our fight for freedom? And then darkness closed over him, merciful darkness.

The next he knew, he was being served a cup of soapy water by two members of the technocrat class; an armed policeman lounged in the background, punch-gun ready were the situation to require it.

Seated in the corner of the chamber was an extraordinarily beautiful dark-haired woman; she wore a miniskirt and boots — old-fashioned but enticingly foxy — and, he saw, she had the most enormous and warm eyes he had ever seen in his life. Who was she? And — what did she want with him? Why had he been brought before her?

"Your name," one of the white-clad technocrats said.

"Contemptible," he managed to say, unable to take his eyes off the extraordinarily beautiful young woman.

"You have an appointment with DNA Reappraisal," the other of the white-clad technocrats said crisply. "What is your purpose? What ukase emanating from the gene pool do you intend — did you intend, I should say — to alter?"

Joe said lamely, “I — wanted to be reprogrammed for… you know. Longer life. The encoding for death was about to come up for me, and I —”

“We know that isn’t true,” the lovely dark-haired woman said in a husky, sexy voice, but a voice nonetheless filled with intelligence and authority. “You were attempting suicide, were you not, Mr. Contemptible, by having your DNA coding tinkered with, not to postpone your death, *but to bring it on*?”

He said nothing. Obviously, they knew.

“WHY?” the woman said sharply.

“I —” He hesitated. Then, slumping in defeat he managed to say, “I’m not married. I’ve got no wife. Nothing. Just my damn job at the record store. All those damn German songs and those bubblegum rock lyrics; they go through my head night and day, constantly, mixtures of Goethe and Heine and Neil Diamond.” Lifting his head he said with furious defiance, “So why should I live on? Call that living? It’s existence, not living.”

There was silence.

Three frogs hopped across the floor. Mr. Computer was now turning out frogs from all the airducts on earth. Half an hour before, it had been dead cats.

“Do you know what it is like,” Joe said quietly, “to have such lyrics as ‘The song I sang to you / The love I brang to you’ keep floating through your head?”

The dark-haired lovely woman said, suddenly, “I think I do know, Contemptible. You see, I am Joan Simpson.”

“Then —” Joe understood in an instant. “You’re down there at the center of the earth watching endless daytime soap operas! On a closed loop!”

“Not watching,” Joan Simpson said. “Hearing. They’re from radio, not TV.”

Joe said nothing. There was nothing to say.

One of the white-clad technocrats said, “Ms. Simpson, work must begin restoring Mr. Computer to sanity. It is presently turning out hundreds of thousands of Pollys.”

” ‘Pollys’?” Joan Simpson said, puzzled; then understanding flooded her warm features. “Oh yes. His childhood sweetheart.”

“Mr. Contemptible,” one of the white-clad technocrats said to Joe, “it is because of your lack of love for life that Mr. Computer has gone crackers. To bring Mr. Computer back to sanity we must first bring you back to sanity.” To Joan Simpson, he said, “Am I correct?”

She nodded, lit a cigarette, leaned back thoughtfully. “Well?” she said presently. “What would it take to reprogram you, Joe? So you’d want to live instead of die? Mr. Computer’s abreactive syndrome is directly related to your own. Mr. Computer feels it has failed the world because, in examining a cross index of humans whom it cares for, it has found that you —”

” ‘Cares for’?” Joe Contemptible said. “You mean Mr. Computer likes me?”

“Takes care of,” one of the white-clad technocrats explained.

“Wait.” Joan Simpson scrutinized Joe Contemptible. “You reacted to that phrase ‘cares for.’ What did you think it meant?”

He said, with difficulty, “Likes me. Cares for in that sense.”

“Let me ask you this,” Joan Simpson said, presently, stubbing out her cigarette and lighting another. “Do you feel that no one cares for you, Joe?”

“That’s what my mother said,” Joe Contemptible said.

“And you believed her?” Joan Simpson said.

“Yes.” He nodded.

Suddenly Joan Simpson put out her cigarette. “Well, Doubledome,” she said in a quiet, brisk voice. “There aren’t going to be any more radio soap operas nattering at me any more. I’m not going back down to the center of the earth. It’s over, gentlemen. I’m sorry, but that’s the way it is.”

“You’re going to leave Mr. Computer insane as —”

“I will heal Mr. Computer,” Joan Simpson said in an even voice, “by healing Joe. And —” A slight smile played about her lips. “And myself, gentlemen.”

There was silence.

“All right,” one of the two white-clad technicians said presently. “We will send you both down to the center of the earth. And you can rattle on at each other throughout eternity. Except when it is necessary to lift you out of Dismal Pak to heal Mr. Computer. Is that a fair trade-off?”

“Wait,” Joe Contemptible said feebly, but already Ms. Simpson was nodding.

“It is,” she said.

“What about my conapt?” Joe protested. “My job? My wretched little pointless life as I am normally accustomed to living it?”

Joan Simpson said, “That is already changing, Joe. You have already encountered me.”

“But I thought you would be old and ugly!” Joe said. “I had no idea —”

“The universe is full of surprises,” Joan Simpson said, and held out her waiting arms for him.

The Exit Door Leads In

Bob Bibleman had the impression that robots wouldn't look you in the eye. And when one had been in the vicinity small valuable objects disappeared. A robot's idea of order was to stack everything into one pile. Nonetheless, Bibleman had to order lunch from robots, since vending ranked too low on the wage scale to attract humans.

"A hamburger, fries, strawberry shake, and —" Bibleman paused, reading the printout. "Make that a supreme double cheeseburger, fries, a chocolate malt —"

"Wait a minute," the robot said. "I'm already working on the burger. You want to buy into this week's contest while you're waiting?"

"I don't get the royal cheeseburger," Bibleman said.

"That's right."

It was hell living in the twenty-first century. Information transfer had reached the velocity of light. Bibleman's older brother had once fed a ten-word plot outline into a robot fiction machine, changed his mind as to the outcome, and found that the novel was already in print. He had had to program a sequel in order to make his correction.

"What's the prize structure in the contest?" Bibleman asked.

At once the printout posted all the odds, from first prize down to last. Naturally, the robot blanked out the display before Bibleman could read it.

"What is first prize?" Bibleman said.

“I can’t tell you that,” the robot said. From its slot came a hamburger, french fries, and a strawberry shake. “That’ll be one thousand dollars in cash.”

“Give me a hint,” Bibleman said as he paid.

“It’s everywhere and nowhere. It’s existed since the seventeenth century. Originally it was invisible. Then it became royal. You can’t get it unless you’re smart, although cheating helps and so does being rich. What does the word ‘heavy’ suggest to you?”

“Profound.”

“No, the literal meaning.”

“Mass.” Bibleman pondered. “What is this, a contest to see who can figure out what the prize is? I give up.”

“Pay the six dollars,” the robot said, “to cover our costs, and you’ll receive an —”

“Gravity,” Bibleman broke in. “Sir Isaac Newton. The Royal College of England. Am I right?”

“Right,” the robot said. “Six dollars entitles you to a chance to go to college — a statistical chance, at the posted odds. What’s six dollars? Prat-fare.”

Bibleman handed over a six-dollar coin.

“You win,” the robot said. “You get to go to college. You beat the odds, which were two trillion to one against. Let me be the first to congratulate you. If I had a hand, I’d shake hands with you. This will change your life. This has been your lucky day.”

“It’s a setup,” Bibleman said, feeling a rush of anxiety.

“You’re right,” the robot said, and it looked Bibleman right in the eye. “It’s also mandatory that you accept your prize. The college is a military college located in Buttfuck, Egypt, so to speak. But that’s no problem; you’ll be taken there. Go home and start packing.”

“Can’t I eat my hamburger and drink —”

“I’d suggest you start packing right away.”

Behind Bibleman a man and woman had lined up; reflexively he got out of their way, trying to hold on to his tray of food, feeling dizzy.

“A charbroiled steak sandwich,” the man said, “onion rings, root beer, and that’s it.”

The robot said, “Care to buy into the contest? Terrific prizes.” It flashed the odds on its display panel.

When Bob Bibleman unlocked the door of his one-room apartment, his telephone was on. It was looking for him.

“There you are,” the telephone said.

“I’m not going to do it,” Bibleman said.

“Sure you are,” the phone said. “Do you know who this is? Read over your certificate, your first-prize legal form. You hold the rank of shavetail. I’m Major Casals. You’re under my jurisdiction. If I tell you to piss purple, you’ll piss purple. How soon can you be on a transplan rocket? Do you have friends you want to say goodbye to? A sweetheart, perhaps? Your mother?”

“Am I coming back?” Bibleman said with anger. “I mean, who are we fighting, this college? For that matter, what college is it? Who is on the faculty? Is it a liberal arts college or does it specialize in the hard sciences? Is it government-sponsored? Does it offer —”

“Just calm down,” Major Casals said quietly.

Bibleman seated himself. He discovered that his hands were shaking. To himself he thought, I was born in the wrong century. A hundred years ago this wouldn’t have happened and a hundred years from now it will be illegal. What I need is a lawyer.

His life had been a quiet one. He had, over the years, advanced to the modest position of floating-home salesman. For a man twenty-two years old, that wasn’t bad. He almost owned his one-room apartment; that is, he rented with an option to buy. It was a small life, as lives went; he did not ask too much and he did not complain — normally — at what he received. Although he did not understand the tax structure that cut through his income, he accepted it; he accepted a modified state of penury the same way he accepted it when a girl would not go to bed with him. In a sense this defined him; this was his measure. He submitted to what he did not like, and he regarded this attitude as a virtue. Most people in authority over him considered him a good person. As to those over whom *he* had authority, that was a class with zero members. His boss at Cloud Nine Homes told him what to do and his customers, really, told him what to do. The government told everyone what to do, or so he assumed. He had very few dealings with the government. That was neither a virtue nor a vice; it was simply good luck.

Once he had experienced vague dreams. They had to do with giving to the poor. In high school he had read Charles Dickens and a vivid idea of the oppressed had fixed itself in his mind to the point where he could see them: all those who did not have a one-room apartment and a job and a high school education. Certain vague place names had floated through his head, gleaned from TV, places like India, where heavy-duty machinery swept up the dying. Once a teaching machine had told him, *You have a good heart.*

That amazed him — not that a machine would say so, but that it would say it to him. A girl had told him the same thing. He marveled at this. Vast forces colluding to tell him that he was not a bad person! It was a mystery and a delight.

But those days had passed. He no longer read novels, and the girl had been transferred to Frankfurt. Now he had been set up by a robot, a cheap machine, to shovel shit in the boonies, dragooned by a mechanical scam that was probably pulling citizens off the streets in record numbers. This was not a college he was going to; he had won nothing. He had won a stint at some kind of forced-labor camp, most likely. The exit door leads in, he thought to himself. Which is to say, when they want you they already have you; all they need is the paperwork. And a computer can process the forms at the touch of a key. The H key for hell and the S key for slave, he thought. And the Y key for you.

Don’t forget your toothbrush, he thought. You may need it.

On the phone screen Major Casals regarded him, as if silently estimating the chances that Bob Bibleman might bolt. Two trillion to one I will, Bibleman thought. But the one will win, as in the contest; I’ll do what I’m told.

“Please,” Bibleman said, “let me ask you one thing, and give me an honest answer.”

“Of course,” Major Casals said.

“If I hadn’t gone up to that Earl’s Senior robot and —”

“We’d have gotten you anyhow,” Major Casals said.

“Okay,” Bibleman said, nodding. “Thanks. It makes me feel better. I don’t have to tell myself stupid stuff like, If only I hadn’t felt like a hamburger and fries. If only —” He broke off. “I’d better pack.”

Major Casals said, “We’ve been running an evaluation on you for several months. You’re overly endowed for the kind of work you do. And undereducated. You need more education. You’re *entitled to* more education.”

Astonished, Bibleman said, “You’re talking about it as if it’s a genuine college!”

“It is. It’s the finest in the system. It isn’t advertised; something like this can’t be. No one selects it; the college selects you. Those were not joke odds that you saw posted. You can’t really imagine being admitted to the finest college in the system by this method, can you, Mr. Bibleman? You have a lot to learn.”

“How long will I be at the college?” Bibleman said.

Major Casals said, “Until you have learned.”

They gave him a physical, a haircut, a uniform, and a place to bunk down, and many psychological tests. Bibleman suspected that the true purpose of the tests was to determine if he were a latent homosexual, and then he suspected that his suspicions indicated that he *was* a latent homosexual, so he abandoned the suspicions and supposed instead that they were sly intelligence and aptitude tests, and he informed himself that he was showing both: intelligence and aptitude. He also informed himself that he looked great in his uniform, even though it was the same uniform that everyone else wore. That is why they call it a uniform, he reminded himself as he sat on the edge of his bunk reading his orientation pamphlets.

The first pamphlet pointed out that it was a great honor to be admitted to the College. That was its name — the one word. How strange, he thought, puzzled. It’s like naming your cat Cat and your dog Dog. This is my mother, Mrs. Mother, and my father, Mr. Father. Are these people working right? he wondered. It had been a phobia of his for years that someday he would fall into the hands of madmen — in particular, madmen who seemed sane up until the last moment. To Bibleman this was the essence of horror.

As he sat scrutinizing the pamphlets, a red-haired girl, wearing the College uniform, came over and seated herself beside him. She seemed perplexed.

“Maybe you can help me,” she said. “What is a syllabus? It says here that we’ll be given a syllabus. This place is screwing up my head.”

Bibleman said, “We’ve been dragooned off the streets to shovel shit.”

“You think so?”

“I know so.”

“Can’t we just leave?”

“You leave first,” Bibleman said. “And I’ll wait and see what happens to you.”

The girl laughed. “I guess you don’t know what a syllabus is.”

“Sure I do. It’s an abstract of courses or topics.”

“Yes, and pigs can whistle.”

He regarded her. The girl regarded him.

“We’re going to be here forever,” the girl said.

Her name, she told him, was Mary Lorne. She was, he decided, pretty, wistful, afraid, and putting up a good front. Together they joined the other new students for a showing of a recent Herbie the Hyena cartoon which Bibleman had seen; it was the episode in which Herbie attempted to assassinate the Russian monk Rasputin. In his usual fashion, Herbie the

Hyena poisoned his victim, shot him, blew him up six times, stabbed him, tied him up with chains and sank him in the Volga, tore him apart with wild horses, and finally shot him to the moon strapped to a rocket. The cartoon bored Bibleman. He did not give a damn about Herbie the Hyena or Russian history and he wondered if this was a sample of the College's level of pedagogy. He could imagine Herbie the Hyena illustrating Heisenberg's indeterminacy principle. Herbie — in Bibleman's mind — chased after by a subatomic particle fruitlessly, the particle bobbing up at random here and there… Herbie making wild swings at it with a hammer; then a whole flock of subatomic particles jeering at Herbie, who was doomed as always to fuck up.

"What are you thinking about?" Mary whispered to him.

The cartoon ended; the hall lights came on. There stood Major Casals on the stage, larger than on the phone. The fun is over, Bibleman said to himself. He could not imagine Major Casals chasing subatomic particles fruitlessly with wild swings of a sledgehammer. He felt himself grow cold and grim and a little afraid.

The lecture had to do with classified information. Behind Major Casals a giant hologram lit up with a schematic diagram of a homeostatic drilling rig. Within the hologram the rig rotated so that they could see it from all angles. Different stages of the rig's interior glowed in various colors.

"I asked what you were thinking," Mary whispered.

"We have to listen," Bibleman said quietly.

Mary said, equally quietly, "It finds titanium ore on its own. Big deal. Titanium is the ninth most abundant element in the crust of the planet. I'd be impressed if it could seek out and mine pure wurtzite, which is found only at Potosi, Bolivia; Butte, Montana; and Goldfield, Nevada."

"Why is that?" Bibleman said.

“Because,” Mary said, “wurtzite is unstable at temperatures below one thousand degrees centigrade. And further —” She broke off. Major Casals had ceased talking and was looking at her.

“Would you repeat that for all of us, young woman?” Major Casals said.

Standing, Mary said, “Wurtzite is unstable at temperatures below one thousand degrees centigrade.” Her voice was steady.

Immediately the hologram behind Major Casals switched to a readout of data on zinc-sulfide minerals.

“I don’t see ‘wurtzite’ listed,” Major Casals said.

“It’s given on the chart in its inverted form,” Mary said, her arms folded. “Which is sphalerite. Correctly, it is ZnS, of the sulfide group of the AX type. It’s related to greenockite.”

“Sit down,” Major Casals said. The readout within the hologram now showed the characteristics of greenockite.

As she seated herself, Mary said, “I’m right. They don’t have a homeostatic drilling rig for wurtzite because there is no —”

“Your name is?” Major Casals said, pen and pad poised.

“Mary Wurtz.” Her voice was totally without emotion. “My father was Charles-Adolphe Wurtz.”

“The discoverer of wurtzite?” Major Casals said uncertainly; his pen wavered.

“That’s right,” Mary said. Turning toward Bibleman, she winked.

“Thank you for the information,” Major Casals said. He made a motion and the hologram now showed a flying buttress and, in comparison to it, a normal buttress.

“My point,” Major Casals said, “is simply that certain information such as architectural principles of long-standing —”

“Most architectural principles are long-standing,” Mary said.

Major Casals paused.

“Otherwise they’d serve no purpose,” Mary said.

“Why not?” Major Casals said, and then he colored.

Several uniformed students laughed.

“Information of that type,” Major Casals continued, “is not classified. But a good deal of what you will be learning is classified. This is why the college is under military charter. To reveal or transmit or make public classified information given you during your schooling here falls under the jurisdiction of the military. For a breech of these statues you would be tried by a military tribunal.”

The students murmured. To himself Bibleman thought, Banged, ganged, and then some. No one spoke. Even the girl beside him was silent. A complicated expression had crossed her face, however; a deeply introverted look, somber and — he thought — unusually mature. It made her seem older, no longer a girl. It made him wonder just how old she really was. It was as if in her features a thousand years had surfaced before him as he scrutinized her and pondered the officer on the stage and the great information hologram behind him. What is she thinking? he wondered. Is she going to say something more? How can she be not afraid to speak up? We’ve been told we are under military law.

Major Casals said, “I am going to give you an instance of a strictly classified cluster of data. It deals with the Panther Engine.” Behind him the hologram, surprisingly, became blank.

“Sir,” one of the students said, “the hologram isn’t showing anything.”

“This is not an area that will be dealt with in your studies here,” Major Casals said. “The Panther Engine is a two-rotor system, opposed rotors serving a common main shaft. Its main advantage is a total lack of centrifugal torque in the housing. A cam chain is thrown between the opposed rotors, which permits the main shaft to reverse itself without hysteresis.”

Behind him the big hologram remained blank. Strange, Bibleman thought. An eerie sensation: information without information, as if the computer had gone blind.

Major Casals said, “The College is forbidden to release any information about the Panther Engine. It cannot be programmed to do otherwise. In fact, it knows nothing about the Panther Engine; it is programmed to destroy any information it receives in that sector.”

Raising his hand, a student said, “So even if someone fed information into the College about the Panther —”

“It would eject the data,” Major Casals said.

“Is this a unique situation?” another student asked.

“No,” Major Casals said.

“Then there’re a number of areas we can’t get printouts for,” a student murmured.

“Nothing of importance,” Major Casals said. “At least as far as your studies are concerned.”

The students were silent.

“The subjects which you will study,” Major Casals said, “will be assigned to you, based on your aptitude and personality profiles. I’ll call off your names and you will come forward for your allocation of topic assignment. The College itself has made the final decision for each of you, so you can be sure no error has been made.”

What if I get proctology? Bibleman asked himself. In panic he thought, Or podiatry. Or herpetology. Or suppose the College in its infinite computeroid wisdom decides to ram into me all the information in the universe pertaining to or resembling herpes labialis… or things even worse. If there is anything worse.

“What you want,” Mary said, as the names were read alphabetically, “is a program that’ll earn you a living. You have to be practical. I know what I’ll get; I know where my strong point lies. It’ll be chemistry.”

His name was called; rising, he walked up the aisle to Major Casals. They looked at each other, and then Casals handed him an unsealed envelope.

Stiffly, Bibleman returned to his seat.

“You want me to open it?” Mary said.

Wordlessly, Bibleman passed the envelope to her. She opened it and studied the printout.

“Can I earn a living with it?” he said.

She smiled. “Yes, it’s a high-paying field. Almost as good as — well, let’s just say that the colony planets are really in need of this. You could go to work anywhere.”

Looking over her shoulder, he saw the words on the page.

COSMOLOGY COSMOGONY PRE-SOCRATICS

“Pre-Socratic philosophy,” Mary said. “Almost as good as structural engineering.” She passed him the paper. “I shouldn’t kid you. No, it’s not really something you can make a living at, unless you teach… but maybe it interests you. Does it interest you?”

“No,” he said shortly.

“I wonder why the college picked it, then,” Mary said.

“What the hell,” he said, “is cosmogony?”

“How the universe came into being. Aren’t you interested in how the universe —” She paused, eyeing him. “You certainly won’t be asking for printouts of any classified material,” she said meditatively. “Maybe that’s it,” she murmured, to herself. “They won’t have to watchdog you.”

“I can be trusted with classified material,” he said.

“Can you? Do you know yourself? But you’ll be getting into that when the College bombards you with early Greek thought. ‘Know thyself.’ Apollo’s motto at Delphi. It sums up half of Greek philosophy.”

Bibleman said, “I’m not going up before a military tribunal for making public classified military material.” He thought, then, about the Panther Engine and he realized, fully realized, that a really grim message had been spelled out in that little lecture by Major Casals. “I wonder what Herbie the Hyena’s motto is,” he said.

” ‘I am determined to prove a villain,’ ” Mary said. ” ‘And hate the idle pleasures of these days. Plots have I laid.’ ” She reached out to touch him on the arm. “Remember? The Herbie the Hyena cartoon version of *Richard the Third.”*

“Mary Lorne,” Major Casals said, reading off the list.

“Excuse me.” She went up, returned with her envelope, smiling. “Leprology,” she said to Bibleman. “The study and treatment of leprosy. I’m kidding; it’s chemistry.”

“You’ll be studying classified material.” Bibleman said.

“Yes,” she said. “I know.”

On the first day of his study program, Bob Bibleman set his College input-output terminal on AUDIO and punched the proper key for his coded course.

“Thales of Miletus,” the terminal said. “The founder of the Ionian school of natural philosophy.”

“What did he teach?” Bibleman said.

“That the world floated on water, was sustained by water, and originated in water.”

“That’s really stupid,” Bibleman said.

The College terminal said, “Thales based this on the discovery of fossil fish far inland, even at high altitudes. So it is not as stupid as it sounds.” It showed on its holoscreen a great deal of written information, no part of which struck Bibleman as very interesting. Anyhow, he had requested

AUDIO. “It is generally considered that Thales was the first rational man in history,” the terminal said.

“What about Ikhnaton?” Bibleman said.

“He was strange.”

“Moses?”

“Likewise strange.”

“Hammurabi?”

“How do you spell that?”

“I’m not sure. I’ve just heard the name.”

“Then we will discuss Anaximander,” the College terminal said. “And, in a cursory initial survey, Anaximenes, Xenophanes, Paramenides, Melissus — wait a minute; I forgot Heraclitus and Cratylus. And we will study Empedocles, Anaxagoras, Zeno —”

“Christ,” Bibleman said.

“That’s another program,” the College terminal said.

“Just continue,” Bibleman said.

“Are you taking notes?”

“That’s none of your business.”

“You seem to be in a state of conflict.”

Bibleman said, “What happens to me if I flunk out of the College?”

“You go to jail.”

“I’ll take notes.”

“Since you are so driven —”

“What?”

“Since you are so full of conflict, you should find Empedocles interesting. He was the first dialectical philosopher. Empedocles believed that the basis of reality was an antithetical conflict between the forces of Love and Strife. Under Love the whole cosmos is a duly proportioned mixture, called a *krasis.* This *krasis* is a spherical deity, a single perfect mind which spends all its time —”

“Is there any practical application to any of this?” Bibleman interrupted.

“The two antithetical forces of Love and Strife resemble the Taoist elements of Yang and Yin with their perpetual interaction from which all change takes place.”

“Practical application.”

“Twin mutually opposed constituents.” On the holoscreen a schematic diagram, very complex, formed. “The two-rotor Panther Engine.”

“What?” Bibleman said, sitting upright in his seat. He made out the large words PANTHER HYDRODRIVE SYSTEM TOP SECRET above the schematic comprising the readout. Instantly he pressed the PRINT key; the machinery of the terminal whirred and three sheets of paper slid down into the RETRIEVE slot.

They overlooked it, Bibleman realized, this entry in the College's memory banks relating to the Panther Engine. Somehow the cross-referencing got lost. No one thought of pre-Socratic philosophy — who would expect an entry on an engine, a modern-day top-secret engine, under the category PHILOSOPHY, PRE-SOCRATIC , subheading EMPEDOCLES ?

I've got it in my hands, he said to himself as he swiftly lifted out the three sheets of paper. He folded them up and stuck them into the notebook the College had provided.

I've hit it, he thought. Right off the bat. Where the hell am I going to put these schematics? Can't hide them in my locker. And then he thought, Have I committed a crime already, by asking for a written printout?

"Empedocles," the terminal was saying, "believed in four elements as being perpetually rearranged: earth, water, air, and fire. These elements eternally —"

Click. Bibleman had shut the terminal down. The holoscreen faded to opaque gray.

Too much learning doth make a man slow, he thought as he got to his feet and started from the cubicle. Fast of wit but slow of foot. Where the hell am I going to hide the schematics? he asked himself again as he walked rapidly down the hall toward the ascent tube. Well, he realized, they don't know I have them; I can take my time. The thing to do is hide them at a random place, he decided, as the tube carried him to the surface. And even if they find them they won't be able to trace them back to me, not unless they go to the trouble of dusting for fingerprints.

This could be worth billions of dollars, he said to himself. A great joy filled him and then came the fear. He discovered that he was trembling. Will they ever be pissed, he said to himself. When they find out, *I* won't be pissing purple, *they'll* be pissing purple. The College itself will, when it discovers its error.

And the error, he thought, is on its part, not mine. The College fucked up and that's too bad.

In the dorm where his bunk was located, he found a laundry room maintained by a silent robot staff, and when no robot was watching he hid the three pages of schematics near the bottom of a huge pile of bed sheets. As high as the ceiling, this pile. They won't get down to the schematics this year. I have plenty of time to decide what to do.

Looking at his watch, he saw that the afternoon had almost come to an end. At five o'clock he would be seated in the cafeteria, eating dinner with Mary.

She met him a little after five o'clock; her face showed signs of fatigue.

"How'd it go?" she asked him as they stood in line with their trays.

"Fine," Bibleman said.

"Did you get to Zeno? I always like Zeno; he proved that motion is impossible. So I guess I'm still in my mother's womb. You look strange." She eyed him.

"Just sick of listening to how the earth rests on the back of a giant turtle."

"Or is suspended on a long string," Mary said. Together they made their way among the other students to an empty table. "You're not eating much."

"Feeling like eating," Bibleman said as he drank his cup of coffee, "is what got me here in the first place."

"You could flunk out."

“And go to jail.”

Mary said, “The College is programmed to say that. Much of it is probably just threats. Talk loudly and carry a small stick, so to speak.”

“I have it,” Bibleman said.

“You have what?” She ceased eating and regarded him.

He said, “The Panther Engine.”

Gazing at him, the girl was silent.

“The schematics,” he said.

“Lower your goddam voice.”

“They missed a citation in the memory storage. Now that I have them I don’t know what to do. Just start walking, probably. And hope no one stops me.

“They don’t know? The College didn’t self-monitor?”

“I have no reason to think it’s aware of what it did.”

“Jesus Christ,” Mary said softly. “On your first day. You had better do a lot of slow, careful thinking.”

“I can destroy them,” he said. “Or sell them.”

He said, “I looked them over. There’s an analysis on the final page. The Panther —”

“Just say *it*,” Mary said.

“It can be used as a hydroelectric turbine and cut costs in half. I couldn’t understand the technical language, but I did figure out that. Cheap power source. Very cheap.”

“So everyone would benefit.”

He nodded.

“They really screwed up,” Mary said. “What was it Casals told us? ‘Even if someone fed data into the College about the — about it, the College would eject the data.’ ” She began eating slowly, meditatively. “And they’re withholding it from the public. It must be industry pressure. Nice.”

“What should I do?” Bibleman said.

“I can’t tell you that.”

“What I was thinking is that I could take the schematics to one of the colony planets where the authorities have less control. I could find an independent firm and make a deal with them. The government wouldn’t know how —”

“They’d figure out where the schematics came from,” Mary said. “They’d trace it back to you.”

“Then I better burn them.”

Mary said, “You have a very difficult decision to make. On the one hand, you have classified information in your possession which you obtained illegally. On the other —”

“I didn’t obtain it illegally. The College screwed up.”

Calmly, she continued, “You broke the law, military law, when you asked for a written transcript. You should have reported the breach of security as soon as you discovered it. They would have rewarded you. Major Casals would have said nice things to you.”

“I’m scared,” Bibleman said, and he felt the fear moving around inside him, shifting about and growing; as he held his plastic coffee cup it shook, and some of the coffee spilled onto his uniform.

Mary, with a paper napkin, dabbed at the coffee stain.

“I won’t come off,” she said.

“Symbolism,” Bibleman said. “Lady Macbeth. I always wanted to have a dog named Spot so I could say, ‘Out, out, damned Spot.’ “

“I am not going to tell you what to do,” Mary said. “This is a decision that you will make alone. It isn’t ethical for you even to discuss it with me; that could be considered conspiracy and put us both in prison.”

“Prison,” he echoed.

“You have it within your — Christ, I was going to say, ‘You have it within your power to provide a cheap power source to human civilization.’ ” She laughed and shook her head. “I guess this scares me, too. Do what you think is right. If you think it’s right to publish the schematics —”

“I never thought of that. Just publish them. Some magazine or newspaper. A slave printing construct could print it and distribute it all over the solar system in fifteen minutes.” All I have to do, he realized, is pay the fee and then feed in the three pages of schematics. As simple as that. And then spend the rest of my life in jail or anyhow in court. Maybe the adjudication would go in my favor. There are precedents in history where vital classified material — military classified material — was stolen and published, and not only was the person found innocent but we now realize

that he was a hero; he served the welfare of the human race itself, and risked his life.

Approaching their table, two armed military security guards closed in on Bob Bibleman; he stared at them, not believing what he saw but thinking, *Believe it.*

"Student Bibleman?" one of them said.

"It's on my uniform," Bibleman said.

"Hold out your hands, Student Bibleman." The larger of the two security guards snapped handcuffs on him.

Mary said nothing; she continued slowly eating.

In Major Casal's office Bibleman waited, grasping the fact that he was being — as the technical term had it — "detained." He felt glum. He wondered what they would do. He wondered if he had been set up. He wondered what he would do if he were charged. He wondered why it was taking so long. And then he wondered what it was all about really and he wondered whether he would understand the grand issues if he continued with his courses in COSMOLOGY COSMOGONY PRE-SOCRATICS.

Entering the office, Major Casals said briskly, "Sorry to keep you waiting."

"Can these handcuffs be removed?" Bibleman said. They hurt his wrists; they had been clapped on to him as tightly as possible. His bone structure ached.

"We couldn't find the schematics," Casals said, seating himself behind his desk.

"What schematics?"

“For the Panther Engine.”

“There aren’t supposed to be any schematics for the Panther Engine. You told us that in orientation.”

“Did you program your terminal for that deliberately? Or did it just happen to come up?”

“My terminal programmed itself to talk about water,” Bibleman said. “The universe is composed of water.”

“It automatically notified security when you asked for a written transcript. All written transcripts are monitored.”

“Fuck you,” Bibleman said.

Major Casals said, “I tell you what. We’re only interested in getting the schematics back; we’re not interested in putting you in the slam. Return them and you won’t be tried.”

“Return what?” Bibleman said, but he knew it was a waste of time. “Can I think it over?”

“Yes.”

“Can I go? I feel like going to sleep. I’m tired. I feel like having these cuffs off.”

Removing the cuffs, Major Casals said, “We made an agreement, with all of you, an agreement between the College and the students, about classified material. You entered into that agreement.”

“Freely?” Bibleman said.

“Well, no. But the agreement was known to you. When you discovered the schematics for the Panther Engine encoded in the College’s memory and available to anyone who happened for any reason, any reason whatsoever, to ask for a practical application of pre-Socratic —”

“I was as surprised as hell,” Bibleman said. “I still am.”

“Loyalty is an ethical principle. I’ll tell you what; I’ll waive the punishment factor and put it on the basis of loyalty to the College. A responsible person obeys laws and agreements entered into. Return the schematics and you can continue your courses here at the College. In fact, we’ll give you permission to select what subjects you want; they won’t be assigned to you. I think you’re good college material. Think it over and report back to me tomorrow morning, between eight and nine, here in my office. Don’t talk to anyone; don’t try to discuss it. You’ll be watched. Don’t try to leave the grounds. Okay?”

“Okay,” Bibleman said woodenly.

He dreamed that night that he had died. In his dream vast spaces stretched out, and his father was coming toward him, very slowly, out of a dark glade and into the sunlight. His father seemed glad to see him, and Bibleman felt his father’s love.

When he awoke, the feeling of being loved by his father remained. As he put on his uniform, he thought about his father and how rarely, in actual life, he had gotten that love. It made him feel lonely, now, his father being dead and his mother as well. Killed in a nuclear-power accident, along with a whole lot of other people

They say someone important to you waits for you on the other side, he thought. Maybe by the time I die Major Casals will be dead and he will be waiting for me, to greet me gladly. Major Casals and my father combined as one.

What am I going to do? he asked himself. They have waived the punitive aspects; it's reduced to essentials, a matter of loyalty. Am I a loyal person? Do I qualify?

The hell with it, he said to himself. He looked at his watch. Eight-thirty. My father would be proud of me, he thought. For what I am going to do.

Going into the laundry room, he scoped out the situation. No robots in sight. He dug down in the pile of bed sheets, found the pages of schematics, took them out, looked them over, and headed for the tube that would take him to Major Casal's office.

"You have them," Casals said as Bibleman entered. Bibleman handed the three sheets of paper over to him.

"And you made no other copies?" Casals asked.

"No."

"You give me your word of honor?"

"Yes," Bibleman said.

"You are herewith expelled from the College," Major Casals said.

"What?" Bibleman said.

Casals pressed a button on his desk. "Come in."

The door opened and Mary Lorne stood there.

"I do not represent the College," Major Casals said to Bibleman. "You were set up."

"I am the College," Mary said.

Major Casals said, “Sit down, Bibleman. She will explain it to you before you leave.”

“I failed?” Bibleman said.

“You failed me,” Mary said. “The purpose of the test was to teach you to stand on your own feet, even if it meant challenging authority. The covert message of institutions is: ‘Submit to that which you psychologically construe as an authority.’ A good school trains the whole person; it isn’t a matter of data and information; I was trying to make you morally and psychologically complete. But a person can’t be commanded to disobey. You can’t order someone to rebel. All I could do was give you a model, an example.”

Bibleman thought, When she talked back to Casals at the initial orientation. He felt numb.

“The Panther Engine is worthless,” Mary said, “as a technological artifact. This is a standard test we use on each student, no matter what study course he is assigned.”

“They *all* got a readout on the Panther Engine?” Bibleman said with disbelief. He stared at the girl.

“They will, one by one. Yours came very quickly. First you are told that it is classified; you are told the penalty for releasing classified information; then you are leaked the information. It is hoped that you will make it public or at least try to make it public.”

Major Casals said, “You saw on the third page of the printout that the engine supplied an economical source of hydroelectric power. That was important. You knew that the public would benefit if the engine design was released.”

“And legal penalties were waived,” Mary said. “So what you did was not done out of fear.”

“Loyalty,” Bibleman said. “I did it out of loyalty.”

“To what?” Mary said.

He was silent; he could not think.

“To a holoscreen?” Major Casals said.

“To you,” Bibleman said.

Major Casals said, “I am someone who insulted you and derided you. Someone who treated you like dirt. I told you that if I ordered you to piss purple, you —”

“Okay,” Bibleman said. “Enough.”

“Goodbye,” Mary said.

“What?” Bibleman said, startled.

“You’re leaving. You’re going back to your life and job, what you had before we picked you.”

Bibleman said, “I’d like another chance.”

“But,” Mary said, “you know how the test works now. So it can never be given to you again. You know what is really wanted from you by the College. I’m sorry.”

“I’m sorry, too,” Major Casals said.

Bibleman said nothing.

Holding out her hand, Mary said, “Shake?”

Blindly, Bibleman shook hands with her. Major Casals only stared at him blankly; he did not offer his hand. He seemed to be engrossed in some other topic, perhaps some other person. Another student was on his mind, perhaps. Bibleman could not tell.

Three nights later, as he wandered aimlessly through the mixture of lights and darkness of the city, Bob Bibleman saw ahead of him a robot food vendor at its eternal post. A teenage boy was in the process of buying a taco and an apple turnover. Bob Bibleman lined up behind the boy and stood waiting, his hands in his pockets, no thoughts coming to him, only a dull feeling, a sense of emptiness. As if the inattention which he had seen on Casal’s face had taken him over, he thought to himself. He felt like an object, an object among objects, like the robot vendor. Something which, as he well knew, did not look you directly in the eye.

“What’ll it be, sir?” the robot asked.

Bibleman said, “Fries, a cheeseburger, and a strawberry shake. Are there any contests?”

After a pause the robot said, “Not for you, Mr. Bibleman.”

“Okay,” he said, and stood waiting.

The food came, on its little throwaway plastic tray, in its little throwaway cartons.

“I’m not paying,” Bibleman said, and walked away.

The robot called after him, “Eleven hundred dollars. Mr. Bibleman. You’re breaking the law!”

He turned, got out his wallet.

“Thank you, Mr. Bibleman,” the robot said. “I am very proud of you.”

Chains of Air, Web of Aether

The planet on which he was living underwent each day two mornings. First CY30 appeared and then its minor twin put in a feeble appearance, as if God had not been able to make up His mind as to which sun He preferred and had finally settled on both. The domers liked to compare it to sequential settings of an old-fashioned multifilament incandescent bulb. CY30 gave the impression of getting up to about 150 watts and then came little CY30B, which added 50 more watts of light. The aggregate luminae made the methane crystals of the planet's surface sparkle pleasantly, assuming you were indoors.

At the table of his dome, Leo McVane drank fake coffee and read the newspaper. He felt anxiety-free and warm because he had long ago illegally redesigned his dome's thermostat. He felt safe as well because he had added an extra metal brace to the dome's hatch. And he felt expectant because today the food man would be by, so there would be someone to talk to. It was a good day.

All his communications gear fumbled along on autostasis, at the moment, monitoring whatever the hell they monitored. Originally, upon being stationed at CY30 II, McVane had thoroughly studied the function and purpose of the complexes of electronic marvels for which he was the caretaker — or rather, as his job coding put it, the "master homonoid overseer." Now he had allowed himself to forget most of the transactions which his charges engaged in. Communications equipment led a monotonous life until an emergency popped up, at which point he ceased suddenly to be the "master homonoid overseer" and became the living brain of his station.

There had not been an emergency yet.

The newspaper contained a funny item from the United States Federal Income Tax booklet for 1978, the year McVane had been born. These entries appeared in the index in this order:

Who Should File

Widows and Widowers, Qualifying

Winnings — Prizes, Gambling, and Lotteries

Withholding — Federal Tax

And then the final entry in the index, which McVane found amusing and even interesting as a commentary on an archaic way of life:

Zero Bracket Amount

To himself, McVane grinned. That was how the United States Federal Income Tax booklet's 1978 index had ended, very appropriately, and that was how the United States, a few years later, had ended. It had fiscally fucked itself over and died of the trauma.

"Food ration comtrix," the audio transducer of his radio announced. "Start unbolting procedure."

"Unbolting under way," McVane said, laying aside his newspaper.

The speaker said, "Put helmet on."

"Helmet on." McVane made no move to pick up his helmet; his atmosphere flow rate would compensate for the loss; he had redesigned it, too.

The hatch unscrewed, and there stood the food man, headbubble and all. An alarm bell in the dome's ceiling shrilled that atmospheric pressure had sharply declined.

"Put your helmet on!" the food man ordered angrily.

The alarm bell ceased complaining; the pressure had restabilized. At that, the food man grimaced. He popped his helmet and then began to unload cartons from his comtrix.

“We are a hardy race,” McVane said, helping him.

“You have amped up everything,” the food man observed; like all the rovers who serviced domes, he was sturdily built and he moved rapidly. It was not a safe job operating a comtrix shuttle between mother ships and the domes of CY30II. He knew it, and McVane knew it. Anybody could sit in a dome; few people could function outside.

“Stick around for a while,” McVane said after he and the food man had unloaded and the food man was marking the invoice.

“If you have coffee.”

They sat facing each other across the table, drinking coffee. Outside the dome the methane messed around, but here neither man felt it. The food man perspired; he apparently found McVane’s temperature level too high.

“You know the woman in the next dome?” the food man asked.

“Somewhat,” McVane said. “My rig transfers data to her input circuitry every three or four weeks. She stores it, boosts it, and transmits it. I suppose. Or for all I know —”

“She’s sick,” the food man said.

McVane said, “She looked all right the last time I talked to her. We used video. She did say something about having trouble reading her terminal’s displays.”

“She’s dying,” the food man said, and sipped his coffee.

In his mind, McVane tried to picture the woman. Small and dark, and what was her name? He punched a couple of keys on the board beside him, her name came up on its display, retrieved by the code they used. Rybus Rommey. “Dying of what?” he said.

“Multiple sclerosis.”

“How far advanced is it?”

“Not far at all,” the food man said. “A couple of months ago, she told me that when she was in her late teens she suffered an — what is it called? Aneurysm. In her left eye, which wiped out her central vision in that eye. They suspected at the time that it might be the onset of multiple sclerosis. And then today when I talked to her she said she’s been experiencing optic neuritis, which —”

McVane said, “Both symptoms were fed to M.E.D.?”

“A correlation of an aneurysm and then a period of remission and then double vision, blurring… you ought to call her up and talk to her. When I was delivering to her, she was crying.”

Turning to his keyboard, McVane punched out and punched out and then read the display. “There’s a thirty to forty percent cure rate for multiple sclerosis.”

“Not out here. M.E.D. can’t get to her out here.”

“Shit,” McVane said.

“I told her to demand a transfer back home. That’s what I’d do. She won’t do it.”

“She’s crazy,” McVane said.

“You’re right. She’s crazy. Everybody out here is crazy. You want proof of it? She’s proof of it. Would you go back home if you knew you were very sick?”

“We’re never supposed to surrender our domes.”

“What you monitor is so important.” The food man set down his cup. “I have to go.” As he got to his feet, he said, “Call her and talk to her. She needs someone to talk to and you’re the closest dome. I’m surprised she didn’t tell you.”

McVane thought, I didn’t ask.

After the food man had departed, McVane got the code for Rybus Rommey’s dome, and started to run it into his transmitter, and then hesitated. His wall clock showed 1830 hours. At this point in his forty-two-hour cycle, he was supposed to accept a sequence of high-speed entertainment audio-and videotaped signals emanating from a slave satellite at CY30 III; upon storing them, he was to run them back at normal and select the material suitable for the overall dome system on his own planet.

He took a look at the log. Fox was doing a concert that ran two hours. Linda Fox, he thought. You and your synthesis of old-time rock and modern-day streng. Jesus, he thought. If I don’t transcribe the relay of your live concert, every domer on the planet will come storming in here and kill me. Outside of emergencies — which don’t occur — this is what I’m paid to handle: information traffic between planets, information that connects us with home and keeps us human. The tape drums have got to turn.

He started the tape transport at its high-speed mode, set the module’s controls for receive, locked it in at the satellite’s operating frequency, checked the wave-form on the visual scope to be sure that the carrier was coming in undistorted, and then patched into an audio transduction of what he was getting.

The voice of Linda Fox emerged from the strip of drivers mounted above him. As the scope showed, there was no distortion. No noise. No clipping. All channels, in fact, were balanced; his meters indicated that.

Sometimes I could cry myself when I hear her, he thought. Speaking of crying.

"*Wandering all across this land,*

My band.

In the worlds that pass above,

I love.

Play for me, you spirits who are weightless.

I believe in drinking to your greatness.

My band."

And behind Linda Fox's vocal, the syntholutes which were her trademark. Until Fox, no one had ever thought of bringing back that sixteenth-century instrument for which Dowland had written so beautifully and so effectively.

"Shall I sue? shall I seek for grace?

Shall I pray? shall I prove?

Shall I strive to a heavenly joy

With an earthly love?

Are there worlds? are there moons

Where the lost shall endure?

Shall I find for a heart that is pure?”

What Linda Fox had done was take the lute books of John Dowland, written at the end of the sixteenth century, and remastered both the melodies and the lyrics into something of today. Some new thing, he thought, for scattered people as flung as if they had been dropped in haste: here and there, disarranged, in domes, on the backs of miserable worlds and in satellites — victimized by the power of migration, and with no end in sight.

“Silly wretch, let me rail
At a trip that is blind.

Holy hopes do require”

He could not remember the rest. Well, he had it taped, of course.

“*… no human may find.”*

Or something like that. The beauty of the universe lay not in the stars figured into it but in the music generated by human minds, human voices, human hands. Syntholutes mixed on an intricate board by experts, and the voice of Fox. He thought, I know what I must have to keep on going. My job is delight: I transcribe this and I broadcast it and they pay me.

“This is the Fox,” Linda Fox said.

McVane switched the video to holo, and a cube formed in which Linda Fox smiled at him. Meanwhile, the drums spun at furious speed, getting hour upon hour into his permanent possession.

“You are with the Fox,” she said, “and the Fox is with *you*.” She pinned him with her gaze, the hard, bright eyes. The diamond face, feral and wise, feral and true; this is the Fox speaking to you. He smiled back.

“Hi, Fox,” he said.

Sometime later he called the sick girl in the next dome. It took her an amazingly long time to respond to his signal, and as he sat noting the signal register on his own board he thought, Is she finished? Or did they come and forcibly evacuate her?

His microscreen showed vague colors. Visual static, nothing more. And then there she was.

“Did I wake you up?” he asked. She seemed so slowed down, so torpid. Perhaps, he thought, she’s sedated.

“No. I was shooting myself in the ass.”

“What?” he said, startled.

“Chemotherapy,” Rybus said. “I’m not doing too well.”

“I just now taped a terrific Linda Fox concert; I’ll be broadcasting it in the next few days. It’ll cheer you up.”

“It’s too bad we’re stuck in these domes. I wish we could visit one another. The food man was just here. In fact, he brought me my medication. It’s effective, but it makes me throw up.”

McVane thought, I wish I hadn’t called.

“Is there any way you could visit me?” Rybus asked.

“I have no portable air, none at all.”

“I have,” Rybus said.

In panic, he said, “But if you’re sick —”

“I can make it over to your dome.”

“What about your station? What if data come in that —”

“I’ve got a beeper I can bring with me.”

Presently he said, “Okay.”

“It would mean a lot to me, someone to sit with for a little while. The food man stays like half an hour, but that’s as long as he can. You know what he told me? There’s been an outbreak of a form of amyotrophic lateral sclerosis on CY30 VI. It must be a virus. This whole condition is a virus. Christ, I’d hate to have amyotrophic lateral sclerosis. This is like the Mariana form.”

“Is it contagious?”

She did not directly answer. Instead she said, “What I have can be cured.” Obviously she wanted to reassure him. “If the virus is around… I won’t come over; it’s okay.” She nodded and reached to shut off her transmitter. “I’m going to lie down,” she said, “and get more sleep. With this you’re supposed to sleep as much as you can. I’ll talk to you tomorrow. Goodbye.”

“Come over,” he said.

Brightening, she said, “Thank you.”

“But be sure you bring your beeper. I have a hunch a lot of telemetric confirms are going to —”

“Oh, fuck the telemetric confirms!” Rybus said, with venom. “I’m so sick of being stuck in this goddam dome! Aren’t you going buggy sitting

around watching tape drums turn and little meters and gauges and shit?”

“I think you should go back home,” he said.

“No,” she said, more calmly. “I’m going to follow exactly the M.E.D. instructions for my chemotherapy and beat this fucking M.S. I’m not going home. I’ll come over and fix your dinner. I’m a good cook. My mother was Italian and my father is Chicano so I spice everything I fix, except you can’t get spices out here. But I figured out how to beat that with different synthetics. I’ve been experimenting.”

“In this concert I’m going to be broadcasting,” McVane said, “the Fox does a version of Dowland’s ‘Shall I Sue.’ “

“A song about litigation?”

“No. ‘Sue’ in the sense of to pay court to or woo. In matters of love.” And then he realized that she was putting him on.

“Do you want to know what I think of the Fox?” Rybus asked. “Recycled sentimentality, which is the worst kind of sentimentality; it isn’t even original. And she looks like her face is on upside down. She has a mean mouth.”

“I like her,” he said stiffly; he felt himself becoming mad, really mad. I’m supposed to help you? he asked himself. Run the risk of catching what you have so you can insult the Fox?

“I’ll fix you beef stroganoff with parsley noodles,” Rybus said.

“I’m doing fine,” he said.

Hesitating, she said in a low, faltering voice, “Then you don’t want me to come over?”

“I —” he said.

“I’m very frightened, Mr. McVane,” Rybus said. “Fifteen minutes from now, I’m going to be throwing up from the IV Neurotoxite. But I don’t want to be alone. I don’t want to give up my dome and I don’t want to be by myself. I’m sorry if I offended you. It’s just that to me the Fox is a joke. I won’t say anything more; I promise.”

“Do you have the —” He amended what he intended to say. “Are you sure it won’t be too much for you, fixing dinner?”

“I’m stronger now than I will be,” she said. “I’ll be getting weaker for a long time.”

“How long?”

“There’s no way to tell.”

He thought, You are going to die. He knew it and she knew it. They did not have to talk about it. The complicity of silence was there, the agreement. A dying girl wants to cook me a dinner, he thought. A dinner I don’t want to eat. *I’ve got to say no to her. I’ve got to keep her out of my dome*. The insistence of the weak, he thought. Their dreadful power. It is so much easier to throw a body block against the strong!

“Thank you,” he said. “I’d like it very much if we had dinner together. But make sure you keep radio contact with me on your way over here — so I’ll know you’re okay. Promise?”

“Well, sure,” she said. “Otherwise” — she smiled — “they’d find me a century from now, frozen with pots, pans, and food, as well as synthetic spices. You do have portable air, don’t you?

“No, I really don’t,” he said.

And knew that his lie was palpable to her.

The meal smelled good and tasted good, but halfway through Rybus excused herself and made her way unsteadily from the matrix of the dome — his dome — into the bathroom. He tried not to listen; he arranged it with his percept system not to hear and with his cognition not to know. In the bathroom the girl, violently sick, cried out and he gritted his teeth and pushed his plate away and then all at once he got up and set in motion his in-dome audio system; he played an early album of the Fox.

“Come again!

Sweet love doth now invite

Thy graces, that refrain

To do me due delight…”

“Do you by any chance have some milk?” Rybus asked, standing at the bathroom door, her face pale.

Silently, he got her a glass of milk, or what passed for milk on their planet.

“I have antiemetics,” Rybus said as she held the glass of milk, “but I didn’t remember to bring any with me. They’re back at my dome.”

“I could get them for you,” he said.

“You know what M.E.D. told me?” Her voice was heavy with indignation. “They said that this chemotherapy won’t make my hair fall out, but already it’s coming out in —”

“Okay,” he interrupted.

“*Okay*?”

“I’m sorry,” he said.

“This is upsetting you,” Rybus said. “The meal is spoiled and you’re — I don’t know what. If I’d remembered to bring my antiemetics, I’d be able to keep from —” She became silent. “Next time I’ll bring them. I promise. This is one of the few albums of Fox that I like. She was really good then, don’t you think?”

“Yes,” he said tightly.

“Linda Box,” Rybus said.

“What?” he said.

“Linda the box. That’s what my sister and I used to call her.” She tried to smile.

“Please go back to your dome.”

“Oh,” she said. “Well —” She smoothed her hair, her hand shaking. “Will you come with me? I don’t think I can make it by myself right now. I’m really weak. I really am sick.”

He thought, You are taking me with you. That’s what this is. That is what is happening. You will not go alone; you will take my spirit with you. And you know. You know it as well as you know the name of the medication you are taking, and you hate me as you hate the medication, as you hate M.E.D. and your illness; it is all hate, for each and every thing under these two suns. I know you. I understand you. I see what is coming. In fact, it has begun.

And, he thought, I don’t blame you. But I will hang onto the Fox; the Fox will outlast you. And so will I. You are not going to shoot down the luminiferous aether which animates our souls. I will hang onto the Fox and

the Fox will hold me in her arms and hang onto me. The two of us — we can't be pried apart. I have dozens of hours of the Fox on audio-and videotape, and the tapes are not just for me but for everybody. You think you can kill that? he said to himself. It's been tried before. The power of the weak, he thought, is an imperfect power; it loses in the end. Hence its name. We call it weak for a reason.

"Sentimentality," Rybus said.

"Right," he said sardonically.

"Recycled at that."

"And mixed metaphors."

"Her lyrics?"

"What I'm thinking. When I get really angry, I mix —"

"Let me tell you something. One thing. If I am going to survive, I can't be sentimental. I have to be very harsh. If I've made you angry, I'm sorry, but that is how it is. It is my life. Someday you may be in the spot I am in and then you'll know. Wait for that and then judge me. If it ever happens. Meanwhile this stuff you're playing on your in-dome audio system is crap. It has to be crap, for me. Do you see? You can forget about me; you can send me back to my dome, where I probably really belong, but if you have anything to do with me —"

"Okay," he said, "I understand."

"Thank you. May I have some more milk? Turn down the audio and we'll finish eating. Okay?"

Amazed, he said, "You're going to keep on trying to —"

“All those creatures — and species — who gave up trying to eat aren’t with us anymore.” She seated herself unsteadily, holding onto the table.

“I admire you.”

“No,” she said. “I admire *you.* It’s harder on you. I know.”

“Death —” he began.

“This isn’t death. You know what this is? In contrast to what’s coming out of your audio system? This is life. The milk, please; I really need it.”

As he got her more milk, he said, “I guess you can’t shoot down aether. Luminiferous or otherwise.”

“No,” she agreed, “since it doesn’t exist.”

Commodity Central provided Rybus with two wigs, since, due to the chemo, her hair had been systematically killed. He preferred the light-colored one.

When she wore her wig, she did not look too bad, but she had become weakened and a certain querulousness had crept into her discourse. Because she was not physically strong any longer — due more, he suspected, to the chemotherapy than to her illness — she could no longer manage to maintain her dome adequately. Making his way over there one day, he was shocked at what he found. Dishes, pots and pans and even glasses of spoiled food, dirty clothes strewn everywhere, litter and debris… troubled, he cleaned up for her and, to his vast dismay, realized that there was an odor pervading her dome, a sweet mixture of the smell of illness, of complex medications, the soiled clothing, and, worst of all, the rotting food itself.

Until he cleaned an area, there was not even a place for him to sit. Rybus lay in bed, wearing a plastic robe open at the back. Apparently,

however, she still managed to operate her electronic equipment; he noted that the meters indicated full activity. But she used the remote programmer normally reserved for emergency conditions; she lay propped up in bed with the programmer beside her, along with a magazine and a bowl of cereal and several bottles of medication.

As before, he discussed the possibility of getting her transferred. She refused to be taken off her job; she had not budged.

“I’m not going into a hospital,” she told him, and that, for her, ended the conversation.

Later, back at his own dome, gratefully back, he put a plan into operation. The large AI System — Artificial Intelligence Plasma — which handled the major problem-solving for star systems in their area of the galaxy had some available time which could be bought for private use. Accordingly, he punched in an application and posted the total sum of financial credits he had saved up during the last few months.

From Fomalhaut, where the Plasma drifted, he received back a positive response. The team which handled traffic for the Plasma was agreeing to sell him fifteen minutes of the Plasma’s time.

At the rate at which he was being metered, he was motivated to feed the Plasma his data very skillfully and very rapidly. He told the Plasma who Rybus was — which gave the AI System access to her complete files, including her psychological profile — and he told it that his dome was the closest dome to her, and he told it of her fierce determination to live and her refusal to accept a medical discharge or even transfer from her station. He cupped his head into the shell for psychotronic output so that the Plasma at Fomalhaut could draw directly from his thoughts, thus making available to it all his unconscious, marginal impressions, realizations, doubts, ideas, anxieties, needs.

“There will be a five-day delay in response,” the team signaled him. “Because of the distance involved. Your payment has been received and

recorded. Over.”

“Over,” he said, feeling glum. He had spent everything he had. A vacuum had consumed his worth. But the Plasma was the court of last appeal in matters of problem-solving. WHAT SHOULD I DO? he had asked the Plasma. In five days he would have the answer.

During the next five days, Rybus became considerably weaker. She still fixed her own meals, however, although she seemed to eat the same thing over and over again: a dish of high-protein macaroni with grated cheese sprinkled over it. One day he found her wearing dark glasses. She did not want him to see her eyes.

“My bad eye has gone berserk,” she said dispassionately. “Rolled up in my head like a window shade.” Spilled capsules and tablets lay everywhere around her on her bed. He picked up one of the half-empty bottles and saw that she was taking one of the most powerful analgesics available.

“M.E.D. is prescribing this for you?” he said, wondering, Is she in that much pain?

“I know somebody,” Rybus said. “At a dome on IV. The food man brought it over to me.”

“This stuff is addictive.”

“I’m lucky to get it. I shouldn’t really have it.”

“I know you shouldn’t.”

“That goddam M.E.D.” The vindictiveness of her tone was surprising. “It’s like dealing with a lower life-form. By the time they get around to prescribing, and then getting the medication to you, Christ, you’re an urn of ashes. I see no point in them prescribing for an urn of ashes.” She put her

hand up to her skull. “I’m sorry; I should keep my wig on when you’re here.”

“It doesn’t matter,” he said.

“Could you bring me some Coke? Coke settles my stomach.”

From her refrigerator he took a liter bottle of cola and poured her a glass. He had to wash the glass first; there wasn’t a clean one in the dome.

Propped up before her at the foot of her bed, she had her standard-issue TV set going. It gabbled away mindlessly, but no one was listening or watching. He realized that every time he came over she had it on, even in the middle of the night.

When he returned to his own dome, he felt a tremendous sense of relief, of an odious burden being lifted from him. Just to put physical distance between himself and her — that was a joy which raised his spirits. It’s as if, he thought, when I’m with her I have what she has. We share the illness.

He did not feel like playing any Fox recordings so instead he put on the Mahler Second Symphony, *The Resurrection.* The only symphony scored for many pieces of rattan, he mused. A Ruthe, which looks like a small broom; they use it to play the bass drum. Too bad Mahler never saw a Morley wah-wah pedal, he thought, or he would have scored it into one of his longer symphonies.

Just as the chorus came in, his in-dome audio system shut down; an extrinsic override had silenced it.

“Transmission from Fomalhaut.”

“Standing by.”

“Use video, please. Ten seconds till start.”

“Thank you,” he said.

A readout appeared on his larger screen. It was the AI System, the plasma, replying a day early.

SUBJECT: RYBUS ROMMEY

ANALYSIS: THANATOUS

PROGRAM ADVICE: TOTAL AVOIDANCE ON YOUR PART

ETHICAL FACTOR: OBVIATED

THANK YOU

Blinking, McVane said reflexively, “Thank you.” He had dealt with the Plasma only once before and he had forgotten how terse its responses were. The screen cleared; the transmission had ended.

He was not sure what “thanatous” meant, but he felt certain that it had something to do with death. It means she is dying, he pondered as he punched into the planet’s reference bank and asked for a definition. It means that she is dying or may die or is close to death, all of which I know.

However, he was wrong. It meant *producing* death.

Producing, he thought. There is a great difference between *death* and *producing death.* No wonder the AI System had notified him that the ethical factor was obviated on his part.

She is a killer thing, he realized. Well, this is why is costs so much to consult the Plasma. You get — not a phony answer based on speculation — but an absolute response.

While he was thinking about it and trying to calm himself down, his telephone rang. Before he picked it up he knew who it was.

“Hi,” Rybus said in a trembling voice.

“Hi,” he said.

“Do you by any chance have any Celestial Seasonings Morning Thunder tea bags?”

“What?” he said.

“When I was over at your dome that time I fixed beef stroganoff for us, I thought I saw a canister of Celestial Seasonings —”

“No,” he said. “I don’t. I used them up.”

“Are you all right?”

“I’m just tired,” he said, and he thought, She said “us.” She and I are an “us.” When did that happen? he asked himself. I guess that’s what the Plasma meant; it understood.

“Do you have any kind of tea?”

“No,” he said. His in-dome audio system suddenly came back on, released from its pause mode now that the Fomalhaut transmission had ended. The choir was singing.

On the phone, Rybus giggled. “Fox is doing sound on sound? A whole chorus of a thousand —”

“This is Mahler,” he said roughly.

“Do you think you could come over and keep me company?” Rybus asked. “I’m sort of at loose ends.”

After a moment, he said, “Okay. There’s something I want to talk to you about.”

“I was reading this article in —”

“When I get there,” he broke in, “we can talk. I’ll see you in half an hour.” He hung up the phone.

When he reached her dome, he found her propped up in bed, wearing her dark glasses and watching a soap opera on her TV. Nothing had changed since he had last visited her, except that the decaying food in the dishes and the fluids in the cups and glasses had become more dismaying.

“You should watch this,” Rybus said, not looking up. “Okay; I’ll fill you in. Becky is pregnant, but her boyfriend doesn’t —”

“I brought you some tea.” He set down four tea bags.

“Could you get me some crackers? There’s a box on the shelf over the stove. I need to take a pill. It’s easier for me to take medication with food than with water because when I was about three years old… you’re not going to believe this. My father was teaching me to swim. We had a lot of money in those days; my father was a — well, he still is, although I don’t hear from him very often. He hurt his back opening one of those sliding security gates at a condo cluster where…” Her voice trailed off; she had again become engrossed in her TV.

McVane cleared off a chair and seated himself.

“I was very depressed last night,” Rybus said. “I almost called you. I was thinking about this friend of mine who’s now — well, she’s my age, but she’s got a class 4-C rating in time-motion studies involving prism fluctuation rate or some damn thing. I hate her. At my age! Can you feature that?” She laughed.

“Have you weighed yourself lately?” he asked.

“What? Oh no. But my weight’s okay. I can tell. You take a pinch of skin between your fingers, up near your shoulder, and I did that. I still have a fat layer.”

“You look thin,” he said. He put his hand on her forehead.

“Am I running a fever?”

“No,” he said. He continued to hold his hand there, against her smooth damp skin, above her dark glasses. Above, he thought, the myelin sheath of nerve fibers which had developed the sclerotic patches which were killing her.

You will be better off, he said to himself, when she is dead.

Sympathetically, Rybus said, “Don’t feel bad. I’ll be okay. M.E.D. has cut my dosage of Vasculine. I only take it *t.i.d.* now — three times a day instead of four.”

“You know all the medical terms,” he said.

“I have to. They issued me a PDR. Want to look at it? It’s around here somewhere. Look under those papers over there. I was writing letters to several old friends because while I was looking for something else I came across their addresses. I’ve been throwing things away. See?” She pointed and he saw sacks, paper sacks, of crumpled papers. “I wrote for five hours yesterday and then I started in today. That’s why I wanted the tea; maybe you could fix me a cup. Put a whole lot of sugar in it and just a little milk.”

As he fixed her the tea, fragments of a Linda Fox adaptation of a Dowland song moved through his mind.

“Thou mighty God

That rightest every wrong…

Listen to Patience

In a dying song."

"This program is really good," Rybus said, when a series of commercials interrupted her TV soap opera. "Can I tell you about it?"

Rather than answering, he asked, "Does the reduced dosage of Vasculine indicate that you're improving?"

"I'm probably going into another period of remission."

"How long can you expect it to last?"

"Probably quite a while."

"I admire your courage," he said. "I'm bailing out. This is the last time I'm coming over here."

"My courage?" she said. "Thank you."

"I'm not coming back."

"Not coming back when? You mean today?"

"You are a death-dealing organism," he said. "A pathogen."

"If we're going to talk seriously," she said, "I want to put my wig on. Could you bring me my blonde wig? It's around somewhere, maybe under those clothes in the corner there. Where that red top is, the one with the white buttons. I have to sew a button back on it, *if* I can find the button."

He found her her wig.

“Hold the hand mirror for me,” she said as she placed the wig on her skull. “Do you think I’m contagious? Because M.E.D. says that at this stage the virus is inactive. I talked to M.E.D. for over an hour yesterday; they gave me a special line.”

“Who’s maintaining your gear?” he asked.

“*Gear*?” She gazed at him from behind dark glasses.

“Your job. Monitoring incoming traffic. Storing it and then transferring it. The reason you’re here.”

“It’s on auto.”

“You have seven warning lights on right now, all red and all blinking,” he said. “You should have an audio analog so you can hear it and not ignore it. You’re receiving but not recording and they’re trying to tell you.”

“Well, they’re out of luck,” she responded in a low voice.

“They have to take into account the fact that you’re sick,” he said.

“Yes, they do. Of course they do. They can bypass me; don’t you receive roughly what I receive? Aren’t I essentially a backup station to your own?”

“No,” he said. “I’m a backup station to yours.”

“It’s all the same.” She sipped the mug of tea which he had fixed for her. “It’s too hot. I’ll let it cool.” Tremblingly, she reached to set down the mug on a table beside her bed; the mug fell, and hot tea poured out over the plastic floor. “Christ,” she said with fury. “Well, that does it; that really does it. *Nothing* has gone right today. Son of a bitch.”

McVane turned on the dome's vacuum circuit and it sucked up the spilled tea. He said nothing. He felt amorphous anger all through him, directed at nothing, fury without object, and he sensed that this was the quality of her own hate: it was a passion which went both nowhere and everywhere. Hate, he thought, like a flock of flies. God, he thought, how I want out of here. How I hate to hate like this, hating spilled tea with the same venom as I hate terminal illness. A one-dimensional universe. It has dwindled to that.

In the weeks that followed, he made fewer and fewer trips from his dome to hers. He did not listen to what she said; he did not watch what she did; he averted his gaze from the chaos around her, the ruins of her dome. I am seeing a projection of her brain, he thought once as he momentarily surveyed the garbage which had piled up everywhere; she was even putting sacks outside the dome, to freeze for eternity. She is senile.

Back in his own dome, he tried to listen to Linda Fox, but the magic had departed. He saw and heard a synthetic image. It was not real. Rybus Rommey had sucked the life out of the Fox the way her dome's vacuum circuit had sucked up the spilled tea.

"And when his sorrows came as fast as floods,

Hope kept his heart till comfort came again."

McVane heard the words, but they didn't matter. What had Rybus called it? Recycled sentimentality and crap. He put on a Vivaldi concerto for bassoon. There is only one Vivaldi concerto, he thought. A computer could do better. And be more diverse.

"You're picking up Fox waves," Linda Fox said, and on his video transducer her face appeared, star-lit and wild. "And when those Fox waves hit you," she said, "you have been *hit*!"

In a momentary spasm of fury, he deliberately erased four hours of Fox, both video and audio. And then regretted it. He put in a call to one of the

relay satellites for replacement tapes and was told that they were back-ordered.

Fine, he said to himself. What the hell does it matter?

That night, while he was sound asleep, his telephone rang. He let it ring; he did not answer it, and when it rang again ten minutes later he again ignored it.

The third time it rang he picked it up and said hello.

“Hi,” Rybus said.

“What is it?” he said.

“I’m cured.”

“You’re in remission?”

“No, I’m cured. M.E.D. just contacted me; their computer analyzed all my charts and tests and everything and there’s no sign of hard patches. Except, of course, I’ll never get central vision back in my bad eye. But other than that I’m okay.” She paused. “How have you been? I haven’t heard from you for so long — it seems like forever. I’ve been wondering about you.”

He said, “I’m okay.”

“We should celebrate.”

“Yes,” he said.

“I’ll fix dinner for us, like I used to. What would you like? I feel like Mexican food. I make a really good taco; I have the ground meat in my

freezer, unless it’s gone bad. I’ll thaw it out and see. Do you want me to come over there or do you —”

“Let me talk to you tomorrow,” he said.

“I’m sorry to wake you up, but I just now heard from M.E.D.” She was silent a moment. “You’re the only friend I have,” she said. And then, incredibly, she began to cry.

“It’s okay,” he said. “You’re well.”

“I was so fucked up,” she said brokenly. “I’ll ring off and talk to you tomorrow. But you’re right; I can’t believe it, but I made it.”

“It is due to your courage,” he said.

“It’s due to you,” Rybus said. “I would have given up without you. I never told you this, but — well, I squirreled away enough sleeping pills to kill myself, and —”

“I’ll talk to you tomorrow,” he said, “about getting together.” He hung up and lay back down.

He thought, When Job had lost his children, lands, and goods, Patience assuaged his excessive pain. And when his sorrows came as fast as floods, Hope kept his heart till comfort came again. As the Fox would put it.

Recycled sentimentality, he thought. I got her through her ordeal and she paid me back by deriding into rubbish that which I cherished the most. But she is alive, he realized; she did make it. It’s like when someone tries to kill a rat. You can kill it six ways and it still survives. You can’t fault that.

He thought, That is the name of what we are doing here in this star system on these frozen planets in these little domes. Rybus Rommey

understood the game and played it right and won. To hell with Linda Fox. And then he thought, But also to hell with what I love.

It is a good trade-off, he thought: a human life won and a synthetic media image wrecked. The law of the universe.

Shivering, he pulled his covers over him and tried to get back to sleep.

The food man showed up before Rybus did; he awoke McVane early in the morning with a full shipment.

“Still got your temp and air illegally boosted,” the food man said as he unscrewed his helmet.

“I just use the equipment,” McVane said. “I don’t build it.”

“Well, I won’t report you. Got any coffee?”

They sat facing each other across the table drinking fake coffee.

“I just came from the Rommey girl’s dome,” the food man said. “She says she’s cured.”

“Yeah, she phoned me late last night,” McVane said.

“She says you did it.”

To that, McVane said nothing.

“You saved a human life.”

“Okay,” McVane said.

“What’s wrong?”

“I’m just tired.”

“I guess it took a lot out of you. Christ, it’s a mess over there. Can’t you clean it up for her? Destroy the garbage, at least, and sterilize the place; the whole goddam dome is septic. She let her garbage disposal get plugged and it backed up raw sewage all over her cupboards and shelves, where her food is stored. I’ve never seen anything like it. Of course, she’s been so weak —”

McVane interrupted, “I’ll look into it.”

Awkwardly, the food man said, “The main thing is, she’s cured. She was giving herself the shots, you know.”

“I know,” McVane said. “I watched her.” Many times, he said to himself.

“And her hair’s growing back. Boy, she looks awful without her wig. Don’t you agree?”

Rising, McVane said, “I have to broadcast some weather reports. Sorry I can’t talk to you any longer.”

Toward dinnertime Rybus Rommey appeared at the hatch of his dome, loaded down with pots and dishes and carefully wrapped packages. He let her in, and she made her way silently to the kitchen area, where she dumped everything down at once; two packages slid off onto the floor and she stooped to retrieve them.

After she had taken off her helmet, she said, “It’s good to see you again.”

“Likewise,” he said.

“It’ll take about an hour to fix the tacos. Do you think you can wait until then?”

“Sure,” he said.

“I’ve been thinking,” Rybus said as she started a pan of grease heating on the stove. “We ought to take a vacation. Do you have any leave coming? I have two weeks owed me, although my situation is complicated by my illness. I mean, I used up a lot of my leave in the form of sick leave. Christ’s sake, they docked me one-half day a month, just because I couldn’t operate my transmitter. Can you believe it?”

He said, “It’s nice to see you stronger.”

“I’m fine,” she said. “Shit, I forgot the hamburger. Goddam it!” She stared at him.

“I’ll go to your dome and get it,” he said presently. She seated herself. “It’s not thawed. I forgot to thaw it out. I just remembered now. I was going to take it out of the freezer this morning, but I had to finish some letters… maybe we could have something else and have the tacos tomorrow night.”

“Okay,” he said.

“And I meant to bring your tea back.”

“I only gave you four bags,” he said.

Eyeing him uncertainly, she said, “I thought you brought me that whole box of Celestial Seasonings Morning Thunder Tea. Then where did I get it? Maybe the food man brought it. I’m just going to sit here for a while. Could you turn on the TV?” He turned on the TV.

“There’s a show I watch,” Rybus said. “I never miss it. I like shows about — well, I’ll have to fill you in on what’s happened so far if we’re

going to watch.”

“Could we not watch?” he said. “Her husband —”

He thought, She’s completely crazy. She is dead. Her body has been healed, but it killed her mind.

“I have to tell you something,” he said.

“What is it?”

“You’re —” He ceased.

“I’m very lucky,” she said. “I beat the odds. You didn’t see me when I was at my worst. I didn’t want you to. From the chemo I was blind and paralyzed and deaf and then I started having seizures; I’ll be on a maintenance dose for years. But it’s okay? Don’t you think? To be on just a maintenance dose? I mean, it could be so much worse. Anyhow, her husband lost his job because he —”

“Whose husband?” McVane said.

“On the TV.” Reaching up she took hold of his hand. “Where do you want to go on our vacation? We so goddam well deserve some sort of reward. Both of us.”

“Our reward,” he said, “is that you’re well.”

She did not seem to be listening; her gaze was fastened on the TV. He saw, then, that she still wore her dark glasses. It made him think, then, of the song the Fox had sung on Christmas Day, for all the planets, the most tender, the most haunting song which she had adapted from John Dowland’s lute books.

“When the poor cripple by the pool did lie

Full many years in misery and pain,

No sooner he on Christ had set his eye,

But he was well, and comfort came again."

Rybus Rommey was saying, "— it was a high-paying job but everyone was conspiring against him; you know how it is in an office. I worked in an office once where —" Pausing, she said, "Could you heat some water. I'd like to try a little coffee."

"Okay," he said, and turned on the burner.

Strange Memories of Death

I woke up this morning and felt the chill of October in the apartment, as if the seasons understood the calendar. What had I dreamed? Vain thoughts of a woman I had loved. Something depressed me. I took a mental audit. Everything was, in fact, fine; this would be a good month. But I felt the chill.

Oh Christ, I thought. Today is the day they evict the Lysol Lady.

Nobody likes the Lysol Lady. She is insane. No one has ever heard her say a word and she won't look at you. Sometimes when you are descending the stairs she is coming up and she turns wordlessly around and retreats and uses the elevator instead. Everybody can smell the Lysol she uses. Magical horrors contaminate her apartment, apparently, so she uses Lysol. God damn! As I fix coffee, I think, Maybe the owners have already evicted her, at dawn, while I still slept. While I was having vain dreams about a woman I loved who dumped me. Of course. I was dreaming about the hateful Lysol Lady and the authorities coming to her door at five A.M. The new owners are a huge firm of real estate developers. They'd do it at dawn.

The Lysol Lady hides in her apartment and knows that October is here, October first is here, and they are going to bust in and throw her and her stuff out in the street. Now is she going to speak? I imagine her pressed against the wall in silence. However, it is not as simple as that. Al Newcum, the sales representative of South Orange Investments, has told me that the Lysol Lady went to Legal Aid. This is bad news because it screws up our doing anything for her. She is crazy but not crazy enough. If it could be proved that she did not understand the situation, a team from Orange County Mental Health could come in as her advocates and explain to South Orange Investments that you cannot legally evict a person with diminished capacity. Why the hell did she get it together to go to Legal Aid?

The time is nine A.M. I can go downstairs to the sales office and ask Al Newcum if they've evicted the Lysol Lady yet, or if she is in her apartment, hiding in silence, waiting. They are evicting her because the building, made up of fifty-six units, has been converted to condominiums. Virtually everyone has moved since we were all legally notified four months ago. You have one hundred and twenty days to leave or buy your apartment and South Orange Investments will pay two hundred dollars of your moving costs. This is the law. You also have first-refusal rights on your rental unit. I am buying mine. I am staying. For fifty-two thousand dollars, I get to be around when they evict the Lysol lady who is crazy and doesn't have fifty-two thousand dollars. Now I wish I had moved.

Going downstairs to the newspaper vending machine, I buy today's Los Angeles *Times.* A girl who shot up a schoolyard of children "because she didn't like Mondays" is pleading guilty. She will soon get probation. She took a gun and shot schoolchildren because, in effect, she had nothing else to do. Well, today is Monday; she is in court on a Monday, the day she hates. Is there no limit to madness? I wonder about myself. First of all, I doubt if my apartment is worth fifty-two thousand dollars. I am staying because I am both afraid to move — afraid of something new, of change — and because I am lazy. No, that isn't it. I like this building and I live near friends and near stores that mean something to me. I've been here three and a half years. It is a good, solid building, with security gates and dead-bolt locks. I have two cats and they like the enclosed patio; they can go outside and be safe from dogs. Probably I am thought of as the Cat Man. So everyone has moved out, but the Lysol Lady and the Cat Man stay on.

What bothers me is that I know the only thing separating me from the Lysol Lady, who is crazy, is the money in my savings account. Money is the official seal of sanity. The Lysol Lady, perhaps, is afraid to move. She is like me. She just wants to stay where she has stayed for several years, doing what she's been doing. She uses the laundry machines a lot, washing and spin-drying her clothes again and again. This is where I encounter her: I am coming into the laundry room and she is there at the machines to be sure no one steals her laundry. Why won't she look at you? Keeping her face turned away… what purpose is served? I sense hate. She hates every other human being. But now consider her situation; those she hates are going to close in

on her. What fear she must feel! She gazes about in her apartment, waiting for the knock on the door; she watches the clock and understands!

To the north of us, in Los Angeles, the conversion of rental units to condominiums has been effectively blocked by the city council. Those who rent won out. This is a great victory, but it does not help the Lysol Lady. This is Orange County. Money rules. The very poor live to the east of me: the Mexicans in their Barrio. Sometimes when our security gates open to admit cars, the Chicano women run in with baskets of dirty laundry; they want to use our machines, having none of their own. The people who lived here in the building resented this. When you have even a little money — money enough to live in a modern, full-security, all-electric building — you resent a great deal.

Well, I have to find out if the Lysol Lady has been evicted yet. There is no way to tell by looking at her window; the drapes are always shut. So I go downstairs to the sales office to see Al. However, Al is not there; the office is locked. Then I remember that Al flew to Sacramento on the weekend to get some crucial legal papers that the state lost. He hasn't returned. If the Lysol Lady wasn't crazy, I could knock on her door and talk to her; I could find out that way. But this is precisely the locus of the tragedy; any knock will frighten her. This is her condition. This is the illness itself. So I stand by the fountain that the developers have constructed, and I admire the planter boxes of flowers which they have had brought in… they have really made the building look good. It formerly looked like a prison. Now it has become a garden. The developers put a great deal of money into painting and landscaping and, in fact, rebuilding the whole entrance. Water and flowers and french doors… and the Lysol Lady silent in her apartment, waiting for the knock.

Perhaps I could tape a note to the Lysol Lady's door. It could read:

Madam, I am sympathetic to your position and would like to assist you. If you wish me to assist you, I live upstairs in apartment C-1.

How would I sign it? Fellow loony, maybe. Fellow loony with fifty-two thousand dollars who is here legally whereas you are, in the eyes of the law, a squatter. As of midnight last night. Although the day before, it was as much your apartment as mine is mine.

I go back upstairs to my apartment with the idea of writing a letter to the woman I once loved and last night dreamed about. All sorts of phrases pass through my mind. I will recreate the vanished relationship with one letter. Such is the power of my words.

What crap. She is gone forever. I don't even have her current address. Laboriously, I could track her down through mutual friends, and then say what?

My darling, I have finally come to my senses. I realize the full extent of my indebtedness to you. Considering the short time we were together, you did more for me then anyone else in my life. It is evident to me that I have made a disastrous error. Could we have dinner together?

As I repeat this hyperbole in my mind, the thought comes to me that it would be horrible but funny if I wrote that letter and then by mistake or design taped it to the Lysol Lady's door. How would she react! Jesus Christ! It would kill her or cure her! Meanwhile, I could write my departed loved one, *die ferne Geliebte,* as follows:

Madam, you are totally nuts. Everyone within miles is aware of it. Your problem is of your own making. Ship up, shape out, get your act together, borrow some money, hire a better lawyer, buy a gun, shoot up a schoolyard. If I can assist you, I live in apartment C-1.

Maybe the plight of the Lysol Lady is funny and I am too depressed by the coming of autumn to realize it. Maybe there will be some good mail today; after all, yesterday was a mail holiday. I will get two days' of mail today. That will cheer me up. What, in fact, is going on is that I am feeling sorry for myself; today is Monday and, like the girl in court pleading guilty, I hate Mondays.

Brenda Spenser pleaded guilty to the charge of shooting eleven people, two of whom died. She is seventeen years old, small and very pretty, with red hair; she wears glasses and looks like a child, like one of those she shot. The thought enters my mind that perhaps the Lysol Lady has a gun in her apartment, a thought that should have come to me a long time ago. Perhaps South Orange Investments thought of it. Perhaps this is why Al Newcum's office is locked up today; he is not in Sacramento but in hiding. Although of course he could be in hiding in Sacramento, accomplishing two things at once.

An excellent therapist I once knew made the point that in almost all cases of a criminal psychotic acting-out there was an easier alternative that the disturbed person overlooked. Brenda Spenser, for instance, could have walked to the local supermarket and bought a carton of chocolate milk instead of shooting eleven people, most of them children. The psychotic person actually chooses the more difficult path; he forces his will uphill. It is not true that he takes the line of least resistance, but he *thinks* he does. There, precisely, lies his error. The basis of psychosis, in a nutshell, is the chronic inability to see the easy way out. All the behavior, all that constitutes psychotic activity and the psychotic lifestyle, stems from this perceptual flaw.

Sitting in isolation and silence in her antiseptic apartment, waiting for the inexorable knock on the door, the Lysol Lady has contrived to put herself in the most difficult circumstances possible. What was easy was made hard. What was hard was transmuted, finally, into the impossible, and there the psychotic lifestyle ends: when the impossible closes in and there are no options at all, even difficult ones. That is the rest of the definition of psychosis: At the end there lies a dead end. And, at that point, the psychotic person freezes. If you have ever seen it happen — well, it is an amazing sight. The person congeals like a motor that has seized. It occurs suddenly. One moment the person is in motion — the pistons are going up and down frantically — and then it's an inert block. That is because the path has run out for that person, the path he probably got onto years before. It is kinetic death. "Place there is none," St. Augustine wrote. "We go backward and

forward, and there is no place." And then the cessation comes and there is only place.

The spot where the Lysol Lady had trapped herself was her own apartment, but it was no longer her own apartment. She had found a place at which to psychologically die and then South Orange Investments had taken it away from her. They had robbed her of her own grave.

What I can't get out of my mind is the notion that my fate is tied to that of the Lysol Lady. A fiscal entry in the computer at Mutual Savings divides us and it is a mythical division; it is real only so long as people such as South Orange Investments — specifically South Orange Investments — are willing to agree that it is real. It seems to me to be nothing more than a social convention, such as wearing matching socks. In another way it's like the value of gold. The value of gold is what people agree on, which is like a game played by children: "Let's agree that that tree is third base." Suppose my television set worked because my friends and I agreed that it worked. We could sit before a blank screen forever that way. In that case, it could be said that the Lysol Lady's failure lay in not having entered into a compact with the rest of us, a consensus. Underlying everything else there is this unwritten contract to which the Lysol Lady is not a party. But I am amazed to think that the failure to enter into an agreement palpably childish and irrational leads inevitably to kinetic death, total stoppage of the organism.

Argued this way, one could say that the Lysol Lady had failed to be a child. She was too adult. She couldn't or wouldn't play a game. The element which had taken over her life was the element of the grim. She never smiled. None had ever seen her do anything but glower in a vague, undirected way.

Perhaps, then, she played a grimmer game rather than no game; perhaps her game was one of combat, in which case she now had what she wanted, even though she was losing. It was at least a situation she understood. South Orange Investments had entered the Lysol Lady's world. Perhaps being a squatter rather than a tenant was satisfying to her. Maybe we all secretly will everything that happens to us. In that case, does the psychotic person

will his own ultimate kinetic death, his own dead end path? Does he play to lose?

I didn't see Al Newcum that day, but I did see him the next day; he had returned from Sacramento and opened up his office.

"Is the woman in B-15 still there?" I asked him. "Or did you evict her?"

"Mrs. Archer?" Newcum said. "Oh, the other morning she moved out; she's gone. The Santa Ana Housing Authority found her a place over on Bristol." He leaned back in his swivel chair and crossed his legs; his slacks, as always, were sharply creased. "She went to them a couple of weeks ago."

"An apartment she can afford?" I said.

"They picked up the bill. They're paying her rent; she talked them into it. She's a hardship case."

"Christ," I said, "I wish someone would pay my rent."

"You're not paying rent," Newcum said. "You're buying your apartment."

I Hope I Shall Arrive Soon

After takeoff the ship routinely monitored the condition of the sixty people sleeping in its cryonic tanks. One malfunction showed, that of person nine. His EEG revealed brain activity.

Shit, the ship said to itself.

Complex homeostatic devices locked into circuit feed, and the ship contacted person nine.

“You are slightly awake,” the ship said, utilizing the psychotronic route; there was no point in rousing person nine to full consciousness — after all, the flight would last a decade.

Virtually unconscious, but unfortunately still able to think, person nine thought, Someone is addressing me. He said, “Where am I located? I don’t see anything.”

“You’re in faulty cryonic suspension.”

He said, “Then I shouldn’t be able to hear you.”

” ‘Faulty,’ I said. That’s the point; you can hear me. Do you know your name?”

“Victor Kemmings. Bring me out of this.”

“We are in flight.”

“Then put me under.”

“Just a moment.” The ship examined the cryonic mechanisms; it scanned and surveyed and then it said, “I will try.”

Time passed. Victor Kemmings, unable to see anything, unaware of his body, found himself still conscious. “Lower my temperature,” he said. He could not hear his voice; perhaps he only imagined he spoke. Colors floated toward him and then rushed at him. He liked the colors; they reminded him of a child’s paint box, the semianimated kind, an artificial life-form. He had used them in school, two hundred years ago.

“I can’t put you under,” the voice of the ship sounded inside Kemmings’ head. “The malfunction is too elaborate; I can’t correct it and I can’t repair it. You will be conscious for ten years.”

The semianimated colors rushed toward him, but now they possessed a sinister quality, supplied to them by his own fear. “Oh my God,” he said. Ten years! The colors darkened.

As Victor Kemmings lay paralyzed, surrounded by dismal flickerings of light, the ship explained to him its strategy. This strategy did not represent a decision on its part; the ship had been programmed to seek this solution in case of a malfunction of this sort.

“What I will do,” the voice of the ship came to him, “is feed you sensory stimulation. The peril to you is sensory deprivation. If you are conscious for ten years without sensory data, your mind will deteriorate. When we reach the LR4 System, you will be a vegetable.”

“Well, what do you intend to feed me?” Kemmings said in panic. “What do you have in your information storage banks? All the video soap operas of the last century? Wake me up and I’ll walk around.”

“There is no air in me,” the ship said. “Nothing for you to eat. No one to talk to, since everyone else is under.”

Kemmings said, “I can talk to you. We can play chess.”

“Not for ten years. Listen to me; I say, I have no food and no air. You must remain as you are… a bad compromise, but one forced on us. You are talking to me now. I have no particular information stored. Here is policy in these situations: I will feed you your own buried memories, emphasizing the pleasant ones. You possess two hundred and six years of memories and most of them have sunk down into your unconscious. This is a splendid source of sensory data for you to receive. Be of good cheer. This situation, which you are in, is not unique. It has never happened within my domain before, but I am programmed to deal with it. Relax and trust me. I will see that you are provided with a world.”

“They should have warned me,” Kemmings said, “before I agreed to emigrate.”

“Relax,” the ship said.

He relaxed, but he was terribly frightened. Theoretically, he should have gone under, into the successful cryonic suspension, then awakened a moment later at his star of destination; or rather the planet, the colony planet, of that star. Everyone else aboard the ship lay in an unknowing state — he was the exception, as if bad karma had attacked him for obscure reasons. Worst of all, he had to depend totally on the goodwill of the ship. Suppose it elected to feed him monsters? The ship could terrorize him for ten years — ten objective years and undoubtedly more from a subjective standpoint. He was, in effect, totally in the ship’s power. Did interstellar ships enjoy such a situation? He knew little about interstellar ships; his field was microbiology. Let me think, he said to himself. My first wife, Martine; the lovely little French girl who wore jeans and a red shirt open at the waist and cooked delicious crepes.

“I hear,” the ship said. “So be it.”

The rushing colors resolved themselves into coherent, stable shapes. A building: a little old yellow wooden house that he had owned when he was nineteen years old, in Wyoming. “Wait,” he said in panic. “The foundation was bad; it was on a mud sill. And the roof leaked.” But he saw the kitchen, with the table that he had built himself. And he felt glad.

“You will not know, after a little while,” the ship said, “that I am feeding you your own buried memories.”

“I haven’t thought of that house in a century,” he said wonderingly; entranced, he made out his old electric drip coffee pot with the box of paper filters beside it. This is the house where Martine and I lived, he realized. “Martine!” he said aloud.

“I’m on the phone,” Martine said from the living room.

The ship said, “I will cut in only when there is an emergency. I will be monitoring you, however, to be sure you are in a satisfactory state. Don’t be afraid.”

“Turn down the rear right burner on the stove,” Martine called. He could hear her and yet not see her. He made his way from the kitchen through the dining room and into the living room. At the VF, Martine stood in rapt conversation with her brother; she wore shorts and she was barefoot. Through the front windows of the living room he could see the street; a commercial vehicle was trying to park, without success.

It’s a warm day, he thought. I should turn on the air conditioner.

He seated himself on the old sofa as Martine continued her VF conversation, and he found himself gazing at his most cherished possession, a framed poster on the wall above Martine: Gilbert Shelton’s “Fat Freddy Says” drawing in which Freddy Freak sits with his cat on his lap, and Fat Freddy is trying to say “Speed kills,” but he is so wired on speed — he holds in his hand every kind of amphetamine tablet, pill, spansule, and capsule that exists — that he can’t say it, and the cat is gritting his teeth and

wincing in a mixture of dismay and disgust. The poster is signed by Gilbert Shelton himself; Kemmings' best friend Ray Torrance gave it to him and Martine as a wedding present. It is worth thousands. It was signed by the artist back in the 1980s. Long before either Victor Kemmings or Martine lived.

If we ever run out of money, Kemmings thought to himself, we could sell the poster. It was not *a* poster; it was *the* poster. Martine adored it. The Fabulous Furry Freak Brothers — from the golden age of a long-ago society.

No wonder he loved Martine so; she herself loved back, loved the beauties of the world, and treasured and cherished them as she treasured and cherished him; it was a protective love that nourished but did not stifle. It had been her idea to frame the poster; he would have tacked it up on the wall, so stupid was he.

"Hi," Martine said, off the VF now. "What are you thinking?"

"Just that you keep alive what you love," he said.

"I think that's what you're supposed to do," Martine said. "Are you ready for dinner? Open some red wine, a cabernet."

"Will an '07 do?" he said, standing up; he felt, then, like taking hold of his wife and hugging her.

"Either an '07 or a '12." She trotted past him, through the dining room and into the kitchen.

Going down into the cellar, he began to search among the bottles, which, of course, lay flat. Musty air and dampness; he liked the smell of the cellar, but then he noticed the redwood planks lying half-buried in the dirt and he thought, I know I've got to get a concrete slab poured. He forgot about the wine and went over to the far corner, where the dirt was piled

highest; bending down, he poked at a board… he poked with a trowel and then he thought, Where did I get this trowel? I didn't have it a minute ago. The board crumbled against the trowel. This whole house is collapsing, he realized. Christ sake. I better tell Martine.

Going back upstairs, the wine forgotten, he started to say to her that the foundations of the house were dangerously decayed, but Martine was nowhere in sight. And nothing cooked on the stove — no pots, no pans. Amazed, he put his hands on the stove and found it cold. Wasn't she just cooking? he asked himself.

"Martine!" he said loudly.

No response. Except for himself, the house was empty. Empty, he thought, and collapsing. Oh my God. He seated himself at the kitchen table and felt the chair give slightly under him; it did not give much, but he felt it; he felt the sagging.

I'm afraid, he thought. Where did she go?

He returned to the living room. Maybe she went next door to borrow some spices or butter or something, he reasoned. Nonetheless, panic now filled him.

He looked at the poster. It was unframed. And the edges had been torn.

I know she framed it, he thought; he ran across the room to it, to examine it closely. Faded… the artist's signature had faded; he could scarcely make it out. She insisted on framing it and under glare-free, reflection-free glass. But it isn't framed and it's torn! The most precious thing we own!

Suddenly he found himself crying. It amazed him, his tears. Martine is gone; the poster is deteriorated; the house is crumbling away; nothing is cooking on the stove. This is terrible, he thought. And I don't understand it.

The ship understood it. The ship had been carefully monitoring Victor Kemmings' brain wave patterns, and the ship knew that something had gone wrong. The wave-forms showed agitation and pain. I must get him out of this feed-circuit or I will kill him, the ship decided. Where does the flaw lie? it asked itself. Worry dormant in the man; underlying anxieties. Perhaps if I intensify the signal. I will use the same source, but amp up the charge. What has happened is that massive subliminal insecurities have taken possession of him; the fault is not mine, but lies, instead, in his psychological makeup.

I will try an earlier period in his life, the ship decided. Before the neurotic anxieties got laid down.

In the backyard, Victor scrutinized a bee that had gotten itself trapped in a spider's web. The spider wound up the bee with great care. That's wrong, Victor thought. I'll let the bee loose. Reaching up, he took hold of the encapsulated bee, drew it from the web, and, scrutinizing it carefully, began to unwrap it.

The bee stung him; it felt like a little patch of flame.

Why did it sting me? he wondered. I was letting it go.

He went indoors to his mother and told her, but she did not listen; she was watching television. His finger hurt where the bee had stung it, but, more important, he did not understand why the bee would attack its rescuer. I won't do that again, he said to himself.

"Put some Bactine on it," his mother said at last, roused from watching the TV.

He had begun to cry. It was unfair. It made no sense. He was perplexed and dismayed and he felt a hatred toward small living things, because they were dumb. They didn't have any sense.

He left the house, played for a time on his swings, his slide, in his sandbox, and then he went into the garage because he heard a strange flapping, whirring sound, like a kind of fan. Inside the gloomy garage, he found that a bird was fluttering against the cobwebbed rear window, trying to get out. Below it, the cat, Dorky, leaped and leaped, trying to reach the bird.

He picked up the cat; the cat extended its body and its front legs; it extended its jaws and bit into the bird. At once the cat scrambled down and ran off with the still-fluttering bird.

Victor ran into the house. “Dorky caught a bird!” he told his mother.

“That goddam cat.” His mother took the broom from the closet in the kitchen and ran outside, trying to find Dorky. The cat had concealed itself under the bramble bushes; she could not reach it with the broom. “I’m going to get rid of that cat,” his mother said.

Victor did not tell her that he had arranged for the cat to catch the bird; he watched in silence as his mother tried and tried to pry Dorky out from her hiding place; Dorky was crunching up the bird; he could hear the sound of breaking bones, small bones. He felt a strange feeling, as if he should tell his mother what he had done, and yet if he told her she would punish him. I won’t do that again, he said to himself. His face, he realized, had turned red. What if his mother figured it out? What if she had some secret way of knowing? Dorky couldn’t tell her and the bird was dead. No one would ever know. He was safe.

But he felt bad. That night he could not eat his dinner. Both his parents noticed. They thought he was sick; they took his temperature. He said nothing about what he had done. His mother told his father about Dorky and they decided to get rid of Dorky. Seated at the table, listening, Victor began to cry.

“All right,” his father said gently. “We won’t get rid of her. It’s natural for a cat to catch a bird.”

The next day he sat playing in his sandbox. Some plants grew up through the sand. He broke them off. Later his mother told him that had been a wrong thing to do.

Alone in the backyard, in his sandbox, he sat with a pail of water, forming a small mound of wet sand. The sky, which had been blue and clear, became by degrees overcast. A shadow passed over him and he looked up. He sensed a presence around him, something vast that could think.

You are responsible for the death of the bird, the presence thought; he could understand its thoughts.

“I know,” he said. He wished, then, that he could die. That he could replace the bird and die for it, leaving it as it had been, fluttering against the cobwebbed window of the garage.

The bird wanted to fly and eat and live, the presence thought.

“Yes,” he said miserably.

“You must never do that again,” the presence told him.

“I’m sorry,” he said, and wept.

This is a very neurotic person, the ship realized. I am having an awful lot of trouble finding happy memories. There is too much fear in him and too much guilt. He has buried it all, and yet it is still there, worrying him like a dog worrying a rag. Where can I go in his memories to find him solace? I must come up with ten years of memories, or his mind will be lost.

Perhaps, the ship thought, the error that I am making is in the area of choice on my part; I should allow him to select his own memories.

However, the ship realized, this will allow an element of fantasy to enter. And that is not usually good. Still —

I will try the segment dealing with his first marriage once again, the ship decided. He really loved Marline. Perhaps this time if I keep the intensity of the memories at a greater level the entropic factor can be abolished. What happened was a subtle vitiation of the remembered world, a decay of structure. I will try to compensate for that. So be it.

"Do you suppose Gilbert Shelton really signed this?" Martine said pensively; she stood before the poster, her arms folded; she rocked back and forth slightly, as if seeking a better perspective on the brightly colored drawing hanging on their living room wall. "I mean, it could have been forged. By a dealer somewhere along the line. During Shelton's lifetime or after."

"The letter of authentication," Victor Kemmings reminded her.

"Oh, that's right!" She smiled her warm smile. "Ray gave us the letter that goes with it. But suppose the letter is a forgery? What we need is another letter certifying that the first letter is authentic." Laughing, she walked away from the poster.

"Ultimately," Kemmings said, "we would have to have Gilbert Shelton here to personally testify that he signed it."

"Maybe he wouldn't know. There's that story about the man bringing the Picasso picture to Picasso and asking him if it was authentic, and Picasso immediately signed it and said, 'Now it's authentic.' " She put her arm around Kemmings and, standing on tiptoe, kissed him on the cheek. "It's genuine. Ray wouldn't have given us a forgery. He's the leading expert on counterculture art of the twentieth century. Do you know that he owns an actual lid of dope? It's preserved under —"

"Ray is dead," Victor said.

“What?” She gazed at him in astonishment. “Do you mean something happened to him since we last —”

“He’s been dead two years,” Kemmings said. “I was responsible. I was driving the buzzcar. I wasn’t cited by the police, but it was my fault.”

“Ray is living on Mars!” She stared at him.

“I know I was responsible. I never told you. I never told anyone. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to do it. I saw it flapping against the window, and Dorky was trying to reach it, and I lifted Dorky up, and I don’t know why but Dorky grabbed it —”

“Sit down, Victor.” Martine led him to the overstuffed chair and made him seat himself. “Something’s wrong,” she said.

“I know,” he said. “Something terrible is wrong. I’m responsible for the taking of a life, a precious life that can never be replaced. I’m sorry. I wish I could make it okay, but I can’t.”

After a pause, Martine said, “Call Ray.”

“The cat —” he said.

“What cat?”

“There.” He pointed. “In the poster. On Fat Freddy’s lap. That’s Dorky. Dorky killed Ray.”

Silence.

“The presence told me,” Kemmings said. “It was God. I didn’t realize it at the time, but God saw me commit the crime. The murder. And he will never forgive me.”

His wife stared at him numbly.

“God sees everything you do,” Kemmings said. “He sees even the falling sparrow. Only in this case it didn’t fall; it was grabbed. Grabbed out of the air and torn down. God is tearing this house down which is my body, to pay me back for what I’ve done. We should have had a building contractor look this house over before we bought it. It’s just falling goddam to pieces. In a year there won’t be anything left of it. Don’t you believe me?”

Marline faltered, “I —”

“Watch.” Kemmings reached up his arms toward the ceiling; he stood; he reached; he could not touch the ceiling. He walked to the wall and then, after a pause, put his hand through the wall.

Marline screamed.

The ship aborted the memory retrieval instantly. But the harm had been done.

He has integrated his early fears and guilts into one interwoven grid, the ship said to itself. There is no way I can serve up a pleasant memory to him because he instantly contaminates it. However pleasant the original experience in itself was. This is a serious situation, the ship decided. The man is already showing signs of psychosis. And we are hardly into the trip; years lie ahead of him.

After allowing itself time to think the situation through, the ship decided to contact Victor Kemmings once more.

“Mr. Kemmings,” the ship said.

“I’m sorry,” Kemmings said. “I didn’t mean to foul up those retrievals. You did a good job, but I —”

“Just a moment,” the ship said. “I’m not equipped to do psychiatric reconstruction of you; I am a simple mechanism, that’s all. What is it you want? Where do you want to be and what do you want to be doing?”

“I want to arrive at our destinalion,” Kemmings said. “I want this trip to be over.”

Ah, the ship thought. That is the solution.

One by one the cryonic systems shut down. One by one the people returned to life, among them Victor Kemmings. What amazed him was the lack of a sense of the passage of time. He had entered the chamber, lain down, had felt the membrane cover him and the temperature begin to drop —

And now he stood on the ship’s external plaiform, the unloading plalform, gazing down at a verdant planetary landscape. This, he realized, is LR4-6, the colony world to which I have come in order to begin a new life.

“Looks good,” a heavyset woman beside him said.

“Yes,” he said, and felt the newness of the landscape rush up at him, its promise of a beginning. Something better than he had known the past two hundred years. I am a fresh person in a fresh world, he thought. And he fell glad.

Colors raced at him, like those of a child’s semianimate kit. Saint Elmo’s fire, he realized. That’s right; there is a great deal of ionization in this planet’s atmosphere. A free light show, such as they had back in the twentieth century.

“Mr. Kemmings,” a voice said. An elderly man had come up beside him, to speak to him. “Did you dream?”

“During the suspension?” Kemmings said. “No, not that I can remember.”

“I think I dreamed,” the elderly man said. “Would you take my arm on the descent ramp? I feel unsteady. The air seems thin. Do you find it thin?”

“Don’t be afraid,” Kemmings said to him. He took the elderly man’s arm. “I’ll help you down the ramp. Look; there’s a guide coming this way. He’ll arrange our processing for us; it’s part of the package. We’ll be taken to a resort hotel and given first-class accommodations. Read your brochure.” He smiled at the uneasy older man to reassure him.

“You’d think our muscles would be nothing but flab after ten years in suspension,” the elderly man said.

“It’s just like freezing peas,” Kemmings said. Holding onto the timid older man, he descended the ramp to the ground. “You can store them forever if you get them cold enough.”

“My name’s Shelton,” the elderly man said.

“What?” Kemmings said, halting. A slrange feeling moved through him.

“Don Shelton.” The elderly man extended his hand; reflexively, Kemmings accepted it and they shook. “What’s the mailer, Mr. Kemmings? Are you all right?”

“Sure,” he said. “I’m fine. But hungry. I’d like to get something to eat. I’d like to get to our hotel, where I can take a shower and change my clothes.” He wondered where their baggage could be found. Probably it would take the ship an hour to unload it. The ship was not particularly intelligent.

In an intimate, confidential tone, elderly Mr. Shelton said, “You know what I brought with me? A bottle of Wild Turkey bourbon. The finest bourbon on Earth. I’ll bring it over to our hotel room and we’ll share it.” He nudged Kemmings.

“I don’t drink,” Kemmings said. “Only wine.” He wondered if there were any good wines here on this distant colony world. Not distant now, he reflected. It is Earth that’s distant. I should have done like Mr. Shelton and brought a few bottles with me.

Shelton. What did the name remind him of? Something in his far past, in his early years. Something precious, along with good wine and a pretty, gentle young woman making crepes in an old-fashioned kitchen. Aching memories; memories that hurt.

Presently he stood by the bed in his hotel room, his suitcase open; he had begun to hang up his clothes. In the corner of the room, a TV hologram showed a newscaster; he ignored it, but, liking the sound of a human voice, he kept it on.

Did I have any dreams? he asked himself. During these past ten years?

His hand hurt. Gazing down, he saw a red welt, as if he had been stung. A bee stung me, he realized. But when? How? While I lay in cryonic suspension? Impossible. Yet he could see the welt and he could feel the pain. I better get something to put on it, he realized. There’s undoubtedly a robot doctor in the hotel; it’s a first-rate hotel.

When the robot doctor had arrived and was treating the bee sting, Kemmings said, “I got this as punishment for killing the bird.”

“Really?” the robot doctor said.

“Everything that ever meant anything to me has been taken away from me,” Kemmings said. “Martine, the poster — my little old house with the

wine cellar. We had everything and now it’s gone. Martine left me because of the bird.”

“The bird you killed,” the robot doctor said.

“God punished me. He took away all that was precious to me because of my sin. It wasn’t Dorky’s sin; it was my sin.”

“But you were just a little boy,” the robot doctor said.

“How did you know that?” Kemmings said. He pulled his hand away from the robot doctor’s grasp. “Something’s wrong. You shouldn’t have known that.”

“Your mother told me,” the robot doctor said.

“My mother didn’t know!”

The robot doctor said, “She figured it out. There was no way the cat could have reached the bird without your help.”

“So all the time that I was growing up she knew. But she never said anything.”

“You can forget about it,” the robot doctor said.

Kemmings said, “I don’t think you exist. There is no possible way that you could know these things. I’m still in cryonic suspension and the ship is still feeding me my own buried memories. So I won’t become psychotic from sensory deprivation.”

“You could hardly have a memory of completing the trip.”

“Wish fulfillment, then. It’s the same thing. I’ll prove it to you. Do you have a screwdriver?”

“Why?”

Kemmings said, “I’ll remove the back of the TV set and you’ll see; there’s nothing inside it; no components, no parts, no chassis — nothing.”

“I don’t have a screwdriver.”

“A small knife, then. I can see one in your surgical supply bag.” Bending, Kemmings lifted up a small scalpel. “This will do. If I show you, will you believe me?”

“If there’s nothing inside the TV cabinet —”

Squatting down, Kemmings removed the screws holding the back panel of the TV set in place. The panel came loose and he set it down on the floor.

There was nothing inside the TV cabinet. And yet the color hologram continued to fill a quarter of the hotel room, and the voice of the newscaster issued forth from his three-dimensional image.

“Admit you’re the ship,” Kemmings said to the robot doctor.

“Oh dear,” the robot doctor said.

Oh dear, the ship said to itself. And I’ve got almost ten years of this lying ahead of me. He is hopelessly contaminating his experiences with childhood guilt; he imagines that his wife left him because, when he was four years old, he helped a cat catch a bird. The only solution would be for Martine to return to him, but how am I going to arrange that? She may not still be alive. On the other hand, the ship reflected, maybe she is alive. Maybe she could be induced to do something to save her former husband’s sanity. People by and large have very positive traits. And ten years from

now it will take a lot to save — or rather restore — his sanity; it will take something drastic, something I myself cannot do alone.

Meanwhile, there was nothing to be done but recycle the wish fulfillment arrival of the ship at its destination. I will run him through the arrival, the ship decided, then wipe his conscious memory clean and run him through it again. The only positive aspect of this, it reflected, is that it will give me something to do, which may help preserve *my* sanity.

Lying in cryonic suspension — faulty cryonic suspension — Victor Kemmings imagined, once again, that the ship was touching down and he was being brought back to consciousness.

“Did you dream?” a heavyset woman asked him as the group of passengers gathered on the outer platform. “I have the impression that I dreamed. Early scenes from my life… over a century ago.”

“None that I can remember,” Kemmings said. He was eager to reach his hotel; a shower and a change of clothes would do wonders for his morale. He felt slightly depressed and wondered why.

“There’s our guide,” an elderly lady said. “They’re going to escort us to our accommodations.”

“It’s in the package,” Kemmings said. His depression remained. The others seemed so spirited, so full of life, but over him only a weariness lay, a weighing-down sensation, as if the gravity of this colony planet were too much for him. Maybe that’s it, he said to himself. But, according to the brochure, the gravity here matched Earth’s; that was one of the attractions.

Puzzled, he made his way slowly down the ramp, step by step, holding onto the rail. I don’t really deserve a new chance at life anyhow, he realized. I’m just going through the motions… I am not like these other people. There is something wrong with me; I cannot remember what it is, but nonetheless it is there. In me. A bitter sense of pain. Of lack of worth.

An insect landed on the back of Kemmings' right hand, an old insect, weary with flight. He halted, watched it crawl across his knuckles. I could crush it, he thought. It's so obviously infirm; it won't live much longer anyhow.

He crushed it — and felt great inner horror. What have I done? he asked himself. My first moment here and I have wiped out a little life. Is this my new beginning?

Turning, he gazed back up at the ship. Maybe I ought to go back, he thought. Have them freeze me forever. I am a man of guilt, a man who destroys. Tears filled his eyes.

And, within its sentient works, the interstellar ship moaned.

During the ten long years remaining in the trip to the LR4 System, the ship had plenty of time to track down Marline Kemmings. It explained the situation to her. She had emigrated to a vast orbiting dome in the Sirius System, found her situation unsatisfactory, and was en route back to Earth. Roused from her own cryonic suspension, she listened intently and then agree to be at the colony world LR4-6 when her ex-husband arrived — if it was at all possible.

Fortunately, it was possible.

"I don't think he'll recognize me," Martine said to the ship. "I've allowed myself to age. I don't really approve of entirely halting the aging process."

He'll be lucky if he recognizes anything, the ship thought.

At the intersystem spaceport on the colony world of LR4-6, Martine stood waiting for the people aboard the ship to appear on the outer platform. She wondered if she would recognize her former husband. She was a little afraid, but she was glad that she had gotten to LR4-6 in time. It had been

close. Another week and his ship would have arrived before hers. Luck is on my side, she said to herself, and scrutinized the newly landed interstellar ship.

People appeared on the platform. She saw him. Victor had changed very little.

As he came down the ramp, holding onto the railing as if weary and hesitant, she came up to him, her hands thrust deep in the pockets of her coat; she felt shy and when she spoke she could hardly hear her own voice.

“Hi, Victor,” she managed to say.

He halted, gazed at her. “I know you,” he said.

“It’s Martine,” she said.

Holding out his hand, he said, smiling, “You heard about the trouble on the ship?”

“The ship contacted me.” She took his hand and held it. “What an ordeal.”

“Yeah,” he said. “Recirculating memories forever. Did I ever tell you about a bee that I was trying to extricate from a spider’s web when I was four years old? The idiotic bee stung me.” He bent down and kissed her. “It’s good to see you,” he said.

“Did the ship —”

“It said it would try to have you here. But it wasn’t sure if you could make it.”

As they walked toward the terminal building, Martine said, “I was lucky; I managed to get a transfer to a military vehicle, a high-velocity-

drive ship that just shot along like a mad thing. A new propulsion system entirely."

Victor Kemmings said, "I have spent more time in my own unconscious mind than any other human in history. Worse than early-twentieth-century psychoanalysis. And the same material over and over again. Did you know I was scared of my mother?"

"*I* was scared of your mother," Martine said. They stood at the baggage depot, waiting for his luggage to appear. "This looks like a really nice little planet. Much better than where I was… I haven't been happy at all."

"So maybe there's a cosmic plan," he said grinning. "You look great."

"I'm old."

"Medical science —"

"It was my decision. I like older people." She surveyed him. He has been hurt a lot by the cryonic malfunction, she said to herself. I can see it in his eyes. They look broken. Broken eyes. Torn down into pieces by fatigue and — defeat. As if his buried early memories swam up and destroyed him. But it's over, she thought. And I did get here in time.

At the bar in the terminal building, they sat having a drink.

"This old man got me to try Wild Turkey bourbon," Victor said. "It's amazing bourbon. He says it's the best on Earth. He brought a bottle with him from…" His voice died into silence.

"One of your fellow passengers," Martine finished.

"I guess so," he said.

“Well, you can stop thinking of the birds and the bees,” Martine said.

“Sex?” he said, and laughed.

“Being stung by a bee, helping a cat catch a bird. That’s all past.”

“That cat,” Victor said, “has been dead one hundred and eighty-two years. I figured it out while they were bringing us out of suspension. Probably just as well. Dorky. Dorky, the killer cat. Nothing like Fat Freddy’s cat.”

“I had to sell the poster,” Martine said. “Finally.”

He frowned.

“Remember?” she said. “You let me have it when we split up. Which I always thought was really good of you.”

“How much did you get for it?”

“A lot. I should pay you something like —” She calculated. “Taking inflation into account, I should pay you about two million dollars.”

“Would you consider,” he said, “instead, in place of the money, my share of the sale of the poster, spending some time with me? Until I get used to this planet?”

“Yes,” she said. And she meant it. Very much.

They finished their drinks and then, with his luggage transported by robot spacecap, made their way to his hotel room.

“This is a nice room,” Marline said, perched on the edge of the bed. “And it has a hologram TV. Turn it on.”

“There’s no use turning it on,” Victor Kemmings said. He stood by the open closet, hanging up his shirts.

“Why not?”

Kemmings said, “There’s nothing on it.”

Going over to the TV set, Martine turned it on. A hockey game materialized, projected out into the room, in full color, and the sound of the game assailed her ears.

“It works fine,” she said.

“I know,” he said. “I can prove it to you. If you have a nail file or something, I’ll unscrew the back plate and show you.”

“But I can —”

“Look at this.” He paused in his work of hanging up his clothes. “Watch me put my hand through the wall.” He placed the palm of his right hand against the wall. “See?”

His hand did not go through the wall because hands do not go through walls; his hand remained pressed against the wall, unmoving. “And the foundation,” he said, “is rotting away.”

“Come and sit down by me,” Martine said.

“I’ve lived this often enough now,” he said. “I’ve lived this over and over again. I come out of suspension; I walk down the ramp; I get my luggage; sometimes I have a drink at the bar and sometimes I come directly to my room. Usually I turn on the TV and then —” He came over and held his hand toward her. “See where the bee stung me?”

She saw no mark on his hand; she took his hand and held it. “There is no bee sting,” she said.

“And when the robot doctor comes, I borrow a tool from him and take off the back plate of the TV set. To prove to him that it has no chassis, no components in it. And then the ship starts me over again.”

“Victor,” she said. “Look at your hand.”

“This is the first time you’ve been here, though,” he said.

“Sit down,” she said.

“Okay.” He seated himself on the bed, beside her, but not too close to her.

“Won’t you sit closer to me?” she said.

“It makes me too sad,” he said. “Remembering you. I really loved you. I wish this was real.”

Martine said, “I will sit with you until it is real for you.”

“I’m going to try reliving the part with the cat,” he said, “and this time *not* pick up the cat and *not* let it get the bird. If I do that, maybe my life will change so that it turns into something happy. Something that is real. My real mistake was separating from you. Here; I’ll put my hand through you.” He placed his hand against her arm. The pressure of his muscles was vigorous; she felt the weight, the physical presence of him, against her. “See?” he said. “It goes right through you.”

“And all this,” she said, “because you killed a bird when you were a little boy.”

“No,” he said. “All this because of a failure in the temperature-regulating assembly aboard the ship. I’m not down to the proper temperature. There’s just enough warmth left in my brain cells to permit cerebral activity.” He stood up then, stretched, smiled at her. “Shall we go get some dinner?” he asked.

She said, “I’m sorry. I’m not hungry.”

“I am. I’m going to have some of the local seafood. The brochure says it’s terrific. Come along anyhow; maybe when you see the food and smell it you’ll change your mind.”

Gathering up her coat and purse, she came with him. “This is a beautiful little planet,” he said. “I’ve explored it dozens of times. I know it thoroughly. We should stop downstairs at the pharmacy for some Bactine, though. For my hand. It’s beginning to swell and it hurts like hell.” He showed her his hand. “It hurts more this time than ever before.”

“Do you want me to come back to you?” Martine said.

“Are you serious?”

“Yes,” she said. “I’ll stay with you as long as you want. I agree; we should never have been separated.”

Victor Kemmings said, “The poster is torn.”

“What?” she said.

“We should have framed it,” he said. “We didn’t have sense enough to take care of it. Now it’s torn. And the artist is dead.”

Rautavaara’s Case

The three technicians of the floating globe monitored fluctuations in interstellar magnetic fields, and they did a good job up until the moment they died.

Basalt fragments, traveling at enormous velocity in relation to their globe, ruptured their barrier and abolished their air supply. The two males were slow to react and did nothing. The young female technician from Finland, Agneta Rautavaara, managed to get her emergency helmet on in time, but the hoses tangled; she aspirated and died: a melancholy death, strangling on her own vomit. Herewith ended the survey task of EX208, their floating globe. In another month, the technicians would have been relieved and returned to Earth.

We could not get there in time to save the three Earth persons, but we did dispatch a robot to see if any of them could be regenerated from death. Earth persons do not like us, but in this case their survey globe was operating in our vicinity. There are rules governing such emergencies that are binding on all races in the galaxy. We had no desire to help Earth persons, but we obey the rules.

The rules called for an attempt on our part to restore life to the three dead technicians, but we allowed a robot to take on the responsibility, and perhaps there we erred. Also, the rules required us to notify the closest Earthship of the calamity and we chose not to. I will not defend this omission nor analyze our reasoning at the time.

The robot signaled that it had found no brain function in the two males and that their neural tissue had degenerated. Regarding Agneta Rautavaara, a slight brain wave could be detected. So in Rautavaara’s case the robot would begin a restoration attempt. However, since it could not make a judgment decision on its own, it contacted us. We told it to make the

attempt. The fault — the guilt, so to speak — therefore lies with us. Had we been on the scene, we would have known better. We accept the blame.

An hour later the robot signaled that it had restored significant brain function in Rautavaara by supplying her brain with oxygen-rich blood from her dead body. The oxygen, but not the nutriments, came from the robot. We instructed it to begin synthesis of nutriments by processing Rautavaara's body, by using it as raw material. This is the point at which the Earth authorities later made their most profound objection. But we did not have any other source of nutriments. Since we ourselves are a plasma we could not offer our own bodies.

The objection that we could have used the bodies of Rautavaara's dead companions was not phrased properly when we introduced it as evidence. Briefly, we felt that, based on the robot's reports, the other bodies were too contaminated by radioactivity and hence were toxic to Rautavaara; nutriments derived from that source would soon poison her brain. If you do not accept our logic, it does not matter to us; this was the situation as we construed it from our remote point. This is why I say our real error lay in sending a robot in rather than going ourselves. If you wish to indict us, indict us for that.

We asked the robot to patch into Rautavaara's brain and transmit her thoughts to us, so that we could assess the physical condition of her neural cells.

The impression that we received was sanguine. It was at this point that we notified the Earth authorities. We informed them of the accident that had destroyed EX208; we informed them that two of the technicians, the males, were irretrievably dead; we informed them that through swift efforts on our part we had the one female showing stable cephalic activity, which is to say, we had her brain alive.

"Her *what*?" the Earth person radio operator said, in response to our call.

“We are supplying her nutriments derived from her body — “

“Oh Christ,” the Earth person radio operator said. “You can’t feed her brain that way. What good is a brain? Qua brain?”

“It can think,” we said.

“All right; we’ll take over now,” the Earth person radio operator said. “But there will be an inquiry.”

“Was it not right to save her brain?” we asked. “After all, the psyche is located in the brain, the personality. The physical body is a device by which the brain relates to —”

“Give me the location of EX208,” the Earth person radio operator said. “We’ll send a ship there at once. You should have notified us at once before trying your own rescue efforts. You Approximations simply do not understand somatic life forms.”

It is offensive to us to hear the term “Approximations.” It is an Earth slur regarding our origin in the Proxima Centaurus System. What it implies is that we are not authentic, that we merely simulate life.

This was our reward in the Rautavaara Case. To be derided. And, indeed, there was an inquiry.

Within the depths of her damaged brain, Agneta Rautavaara tasted acid vomit and recoiled in fear and aversion. All around her, EX208 lay in splinters. She could see Travis and Elms; they had been torn to bloody bits and the blood had frozen. Ice covered the interior of the globe. Air gone, temperature gone… what’s keeping me alive? she wondered. She put her hands up and touched her face — or rather tried to touch her face. My helmet, she thought. I got it on it time.

The ice, which covered everything, began to melt. The severed arms and legs of her two companions rejoined their bodies. Basalt fragments, embedded in the hull of the globe, withdrew and flew away. Time, Agneta realized, is running backward. How strange! Air returned; she heard the dull tone of the indicator horn. And then, slowly, temperature. Travis and Elms, groggily, got to their feet. They stared around them, bewildered. She felt like laughing, but it was too grim for that. Apparently the force of the impact had caused a local time perturbation. “Both of you sit down,” she said.

Travis said thickly, “I — okay; you’re right.” He seated himself at his console and pressed the button that strapped him securely in place. Elms, however, just stood.

“We were hit by rather large particles,” Agneta said.

“Yes,” Elms said.

“Large enough and with enough impact to perturb time,” Agneta said.

“So we’ve gone back to before the event.”

“Well, the magnetic fields are partly responsible,” Travis said. He rubbed his eyes; his hands shook. “Get your helmet off, Agneta. You don’t need it.”

“But the impact is coming,” she said.

Both men glanced at her.

“We’ll repeat the accident,” she said.

“Shit,” Travis said, “I’ll take the EX out of here.” He pushed many keys on his console. “It’ll miss us.”

Agneta removed her helmet. She stepped out of her boots, picked them up… and then saw the Figure.

The Figure stood behind the three of them. It was Christ.

“Look,” she said to Travis and Elms.

Both men looked.

The Figure wore a traditional white robe, sandals; his hair was long and pale with what looked like moonlight. Bearded, his face was gentle and wise.

Just like in the holo-ads the churches back home put out, Agneta thought. Robed, bearded, wise and gentle and his arms slightly raised. Even the nimbus is there. How odd that our preconceptions were so accurate.

“Oh my God,” Travis said. Both men stared and she stared, too. “He’s come for us.”

“Well, it’s fine with me,” Elms said.

“Sure, it would be fine with you,” Travis said bitterly. “You have no wife and children. And what about Agneta? She’s only three hundred years old; she’s a baby.”

Christ said, “I am the vine, you are the branches. Whoever remains in me, with me in him, bears fruit in plenty; for cut off from me, you can do nothing.”

“I’m getting the EX out of this vector,” Travis said.

“My little children,” Christ said, “I shall not be with you much longer.”

“Good,” Travis said. The EX was now moving at peak velocity in the direction of the Sirius axis; their star chart showed massive flux.

“Damn you, Travis,” Elms said savagely. “This is a great opportunity. I mean, how many people have seen Christ? I mean, it *is* Christ. You are Christ, aren’t you?” he asked the Figure.

Christ said, “I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life. No one can come to the Father except through me. If you know me, you know my Father too. From this moment, you know him and have seen him.”

“There,” Elms said, his face showing happiness. “See? I want it known that I am very glad of this occasion, Mr. —” He broke off. “I was going to say, ‘Mr. Christ.’ That’s stupid; that is really stupid. Christ, Mr. Christ, will you sit down? You can sit at my console or at Ms. Rautavaara’s. Isn’t that right, Agneta? This here is Walter Travis; he’s not a Christian, but I am; I’ve been a Christian all my life. Well, most of my life. I’m not sure about Ms. Rautavaara. What do you say, Agneta?”

“Stop the babbling, Elms,” Travis said. To him, Elms said, “He’s going to judge us.”

Christ said, “If anyone hears my words and does not keep them faithfully, it is not I who shall condemn him, since I have come not to condemn the world but to save the world; he who rejects me and refuses my words has his judge already.”

“There,” Elms said, nodding.

Frightened, Agneta said to the Figure, “Go easy on us. The three of us have been through a major trauma.” She wondered, suddenly, if Travis and Elms remembered that they had been killed, that their bodies had been destroyed.

The Figure smiled at her, as if to reassure her.

“Travis,” Agneta said, bending down over him as he sat at his console, “I want you to listen to me. Neither you nor Elms survived the accident, survived the basalt particles. That’s why he’s here. I’m the only one who wasn’t —” She hesitated.

“Killed,” Elms said. “We’re dead and he has come for us.” To the Figure, he said, “I’m ready, Lord. Take me.”

“Take both of them,” Travis said. “I’m sending out a radio H.E.L.P. call. And I’m telling them what’s taking place here. I’m going to report it before he takes me or tries to take me.”

“You’re *dead*,” Elms told him.

“I can still file a radio report,” Travis said, but his face showed his dismay. And his resignation.

To the Figure, Agneta said, “Give Travis a little time. He doesn’t fully understand. But I guess you know that; you know everything.”

The Figure nodded.

We and the Earth Board of Inquiry listened to and watched this activity in Rautavaara’s brain, and we realized jointly what had happened. But we did not agree on our evaluation of it. Whereas the six Earth persons saw it as pernicious, we saw it as grand — both for Agneta Rautavaara and for us. By means of her damaged brain, restored by an ill-advised robot, we were in touch with the next world and the powers that ruled it.

The Earth persons’ view distressed us.

“She’s hallucinating,” the spokesperson of the Earth people said. “Since she has no sensory data coming. Since her body is dead. Look what you’ve done to her.”

We made the point that Agneta Rautavaara was happy.

“What we must do,” the human spokesperson said, “is shut down her brain.”

“And cut us off from the next world?” we objected. “This is a splendid opportunity to view the afterlife. Agneta Rautavaara’s brain is our lens. This is a matter of gravity. The scientific merit outweighs the humanitarian.”

This was the position we took at the inquiry. It was a position of sincerity not of expedience.

The Earth persons decided to keep Rautavaara’s brain at full function, with both video and audio transduction, which of course was recorded; meanwhile the matter of censuring us was put in suspension.

I personally found myself fascinated by the Earth idea of the Savior. It was, for us, an antique and quaint conception; not because it was anthropomorphic but because it involved a schoolroom adjudication of the departed soul. Some kind of tote board was involved listing good and bad acts: a transcendent report card, such as one finds employed in the teaching and grading of children.

This, to us, was a primitive conception of the Savior, and as I watched and listened — as we watched and listened as a polyencephalic entity — I wondered what Agneta Rautavaara’s reaction would have been to a Savior, a Guide of the Soul, based on *our* expectations. Her brain, after all, was maintained by our equipment, by the original mechanism that our rescue robot had brought to the scene of the accident. It would have been too risky to disconnect it; too much brain damage had occurred already. The total apparatus, involving her brain, had been transferred to the site of the judicial inquiry, a neutral ark located between the Proxima System and the Sol System.

Later, in discreet discussion with my companions, I suggested that we attempt to infuse our own conception of the Afterlife Guide of the Soul into Rautavaara's artificially sustained brain. My point: It would be interesting to see how she reacted.

At once my companions pointed out to me the contradiction in my logic. I had argued at the inquiry that Rautavaara's brain was a window on the next world and hence justified — which exculpated us. Now I argued that what she experienced was a projection of her own mental presuppositions, nothing more.

"Both propositions are true," I said. "It is a genuine window on the next world and it is a presentation of Rautavaara's own cultural racial propensities."

What we had, in essence, was a model into which we could introduce carefully selected variables. We could introduce into Rautavaara's brain our own conception of the Guide of the Soul, and thereby see how our rendition differed practically from the puerile one of the Earth persons'.

This was a novel opportunity to test our own theology. In our opinion, the Earth persons' had been tested sufficiently and been found wanting.

We decided to perform the act, since we maintained the gear supporting Rautavaara's brain. To us, this was a much more interesting issue than the outcome of the inquiry. Blame is a mere cultural matter; it does not travel across species boundaries.

I suppose the Earth persons could regard our intentions as malign. I deny that; *we* deny that. Call it, instead, a game. It would provide us aesthetic enjoyment to witness Rautavaara confronted by *our* Savior, rather than hers.

To Travis, Elms, and Agneta, the Figure, raising its arms, said, "I am the Resurrection. If anyone believes in me, even though he dies he will live,

and whoever lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?”

“I sure do,” Elms said heartily.

Travis said, “It’s bilge.”

To herself, Agneta Rautavaara thought, I’m not sure. I just don’t know.

“We’re supposed to decide,” Elms said. “We have to decide if we’re going to go with him. Travis, you’re done for; you’re out. Sit there and rot — that’s your fate.” To Agneta, he said, “I hope you find for Christ, Agneta. I want you to have eternal life like I’m going to have. Isn’t that right, Lord?” he asked the Figure.

The Figure nodded.

Agneta said, “Travis, I think — well, I feel you should go along with this. I —” She did not want to press the point that Travis was dead. But he had to understand the situation; otherwise, as Elms said, he was doomed. “Go with us,” she said.

“You’re going, then?” Travis said, bitterly.

“Yes,” she said.

Elms, gazing at the Figure, said in a low voice, “Quite possibly I’m mistaken, but it seems to be changing.”

She looked, but saw no change. Yet Elms seemed frightened.

The Figure, in its white robe, walked slowly toward the seated Travis. The Figure halted close by Travis, stood for a time, and then, bending, bit Travis’s face.

Agneta screamed. Elms stared, and Travis, locked into his seat, thrashed. The Figure, calmly, ate him.

“Now you see,” the spokesperson for the Board of Inquiry said, “this brain must be shut down. The deterioration is severe; the experience is terrible for her; it must end now.”

I said, “No. We from the Proxima System find this turn of events highly interesting.”

“But the Savior is eating Travis!” another of the Earth persons exclaimed.

“In your religion,” I said, “is it not the case that you eat the flesh of your God and drink his blood? All that has happened here is a mirror image of that Eucharist.”

“I order her brain shut down!” the spokesperson for the Board said. His face was pale; drops of sweat stood out on his forehead.

“We should see more before we shut down,” I said. I found it highly exciting, this enactment of our own sacrament, our highest sacrament, in which our Savior consumes us, his worshippers.

“Agneta,” Elms whispered, “did you see that? Christ ate Travis. There’s nothing left but his gloves and boots.”

Oh God, Agneta Rautavaara thought. What is happening?

She moved away from the Figure, over to Elms. Instinctively.

“He is my blood,” the Figure said as it licked its lips. “I drink of this blood, the blood of eternal life. When I have drunk it, I will live forever. He is my body. I have no body of my own; I am only a plasma. By eating his

body, I obtain everlasting life. This is the new truth that I proclaim, that I am eternal."

"He's going to eat us, too," Elms said.

Yes, Agneta Rautavaara thought. He is. She could see now that the Figure was an Approximation. It is a Proxima life-form, she realized. He's right; he has no body of his own. The only way he can get a body is —

"I'm going to kill him," Elms said. He popped the emergency laser rifle from its rack and pointed it at the figure.

The Figure said, "Father, the hour has come."

"Stay away from me," Elms said.

"In a short time, you will no longer see me," the Figure said, "unless I drink of your blood and eat of your body. Glorify yourself that I may live." The Figure moved toward Elms.

Elms fired the laser rifle. The Figure staggered and bled. It was Travis's blood, Agneta realized. In him. Not his own blood. This is terrible; she put her hands to her face, terrified.

"Quick," she said to Elms. "Say 'I am innocent of this man's blood.' Say it before it's too late."

" 'I am innocent of this man's blood,' " Elms said.

The Figure fell. Bleeding, it lay dying. It was no longer a bearded man. It was something else, but Agneta Rautavaara could not tell what it was. It said, *"Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani?"*

As she and Elms gazed down at it, the Figure died.

“I killed it,” Elms said. “I killed Christ.” He held the laser rifle pointed at himself, groping for the trigger.

“That wasn’t Christ,” Agneta said. “It was something else. The opposite of Christ.” She took the gun from Elms.

Elms was weeping.

The Earth persons on the Board of Inquiry possessed the majority vote and they voted to abolish all activity in Rautavaara’s artificially sustained brain. This disappointed us, but there was no remedy for us.

We had seen the beginning of an absolutely stunning scientific experiment: the theology of one race grafted onto that of another. Shutting down the Earth person’s brain was a scientific tragedy. For example, in terms of the basic relationship to God, the Earth race held a diametrically opposite view from us. This of course must be attributed to the fact that they are a somatic race and we are a plasma. They drink the blood of their God; they eat his flesh; that way they become immortal. To them, there is no scandal in this. They find it perfectly natural. Yet, to us it is dreadful. That the worshipper should eat and drink its God? Awful to us; awful indeed. A disgrace and a shame — an abomination. The higher should always prey on the lower; the God should consume the worshipper.

We watched as the Rautavaara Case was closed — closed by the shutting down of her brain so that all EEG activity ceased and the monitors indicated nothing. We felt disappointment, and in addition the Earth persons voted out a verdict of censure of us for our handling of the rescue mission in the first place.

It is striking, the gulf which separates races developing in different star systems. We have tried to understand the Earth persons and we have failed. We are aware, too, that they do not understand us and are appalled in turn by some of our customs. This was demonstrated in the Rautavaara Case. But were we not serving the purposes of detached scientific study? I myself was amazed at Rautavaara’s reaction when the Savior ate Mr. Travis. I

would have wished to see this most holy of the sacraments fulfilled with the others, with Rautavaara and Elms as well.

But we were deprived of this. And the experiment, from our standpoint, failed.

And we live now, too, under the ban of unnecessary moral blame.

The Alien Mind

Inert within the depths of his theta chamber, he heard the faint tone and then the synthovoice. “Five minutes.”

“Okay,” he said, and struggled out of his deep sleep. He had five minutes to adjust the course of his ship; something had gone wrong with the auto-control system. An error on his part? Not likely; he never made errors. Jason Bedford make errors? Hardly.

As he made his way unsteadily to the control module, he saw that Norman, who had been sent with him to amuse him, was also awake. The cat floated slowly in circles, batting at a pen that somehow had gotten loose. Strange, Bedford thought.

“I thought you were unconscious with me.” He examined the readout of the ship’s course. Impossible! A fifth-parsec off in the direction of Sirius. It would add a week to his journey. With grim precision he reset the controls, then sent out an alert signal to Meknos III, his destination.

“Troubles?” the Meknosian operator answered. The voice was dry and cold, the calculating monotone of something that always made Bedford think of snakes.

He explained his situation.

“We need the vaccine,” the Meknosian said. “Try to stay on course.”

Norman the cat floated majestically by the control module, reached out a paw, and jabbed at random; two activated buttons sounded faint *bleeps* and the ship altered course.

“So you did it,” Bedford said. “You humiliated me in the eyes of an alien. You have reduced me to idiocy vis-à-vis the alien mind.” He grabbed the cat. And squeezed.

“What was that strange sound?” the Meknosian operator asked. “A kind of lament.”

Bedford said quietly, “There’s nothing left to lament. Forget you heard it.” He shut off the radio, carried the cat’s body to the trash sphincter, and ejected it.

A moment later he had returned to his theta chamber and, once more, dozed. This time there would be no tampering with his controls. He dozed in peace.

When his ship docked at Meknos III, the senior member of the alien medical team greeted him with an odd request. “We would like to see your pet.”

“I have no pet,” Bedford said. Certainly it was true.

“According to the manifest filed with us in advance —”

“It is really none of your business,” Bedford said. “You have your vaccine; I’ll be taking off.”

The Meknosian said, “The safety of any life-form is our business. We will inspect your ship.”

“For a cat that doesn’t exist,” Bedford said.

Their search proved futile. Impatiently, Bedford watched the alien creatures scrutinize every storage locker and passageway of his ship. Unfortunately, the Meknosians found ten sacks of dry cat kibble. A lengthy discussion ensued among them, in their own language.

“Do I have permission,” Bedford said harshly, “to return to Earth now? I’m on a tight schedule.” What the aliens were thinking and saying was of no importance to him; he wished only to return to his silent theta chamber and profound sleep.

“You’ll have to go through decontamination procedure A,” the senior Meknosian medical officer said. “So that no spore or virus from —”

“I realize that,” Bedford said. “Let’s get it done.”

Later, when decontamination had been completed and he was back in his ship starting up the drive, his radio came on. It was one or another of the Meknosians; to Bedford they all looked alike. “What was the cat’s name?” the Meknosian asked.

“Norman,” Bedford said, and jabbed the ignite switch. His ship shot upward and he smiled.

He did not smile, however, when he found the power supply to his theta chamber missing. Nor did he smile when the backup unit could also not be located. Did I forget to bring it? he asked himself. No, he decided; I wouldn’t do that. They took it.

Two years before he reached Terra. Two years of full consciousness on his part, deprived of theta sleep; two years of sitting or floating or — as he had seen in military-preparedness training holofilms — curled up in a corner, totally psychotic.

He punched out a radio request to return to Meknos III. No response. Well, so much for that.

Seated at his control module, he snapped on the little inboard computer and said, “My theta chamber won’t function; it’s been sabotaged. What do you suggest I do for two years?”

“Right,” he said. He would have remembered. “Thank you.” Pressing the proper button, he caused the door of the tape compartment to slide open.

No tapes. Only a cat toy — a miniature punching bag — that had been included for Norman; he had never gotten around to giving it to him. Otherwise… bare shelves.

The alien mind, Bedford thought. Mysterious and cruel.

Setting the ship’s audio recorder going, he said calmly and with as much conviction as possible, “What I will do is build my next two years around the daily routine. First, there are meals. I will spend as much time as possible planning, fixing, eating, and enjoying delicious repasts. During the time ahead of me, I will try out every combination of victuals possible.” Unsteadily, he rose and made his way to the massive food storage locker.

As he stood gazing into the tightly packed locker — tightly packed with row upon row of identical snacks - he thought, On the other hand, there’s not much you can do with a two-year supply of cat kibble. In the way of variety. Are they all the same flavor?

They were all the same flavor.

Notes

All notes in italics are by Philip K. Dick. The year when the note was written appears in parentheses following the note. Most of these notes were written as story notes for the collections THE BEST OF PHILIP K. DICK (published 1977) and THE GOLDEN MAN (published 1980). A few were written at the request of editors publishing or reprinting a PKD story in a book or magazine.

When there is a date following the name of a story, it is the date the manuscript of that story was first received by Dick's agent, per the records of the Scott Meredith Literary Agency. Absence of a date means no record is available. The name of a magazine followed by a month and year indicates the first published appearance of a story. An alternate name following a story indicates Dick's original name for the story, as shown in the agency records.

These five volumes include all of Philip K. Dick's short fiction, with the exception of short novels later published as or included in novels, childhood writings, and unpublished writings for which manuscripts have not been found. The stories are arranged as closely as possible in chronological order of composition; research for this chronology was done by Gregg Rickman and Paul Williams.

THE LITTLE BLACK BOX ("From Ordinary Household Objects") 5/6/63. *Worlds of Tomorrow,* Aug 1964.

I made use of this story when I wrote my novel DO ANDROIDS DREAM OF ELECTRIC SHEEP? Actually, the idea is better put forth in the story. Here, a religion is regarded as a menace to all political systems; therefore it, too, is a kind of political system, perhaps even an ultimate one. The concept of caritas *(or* agape*) shows up in my writing as the key to the authentic human. The android, which is the unauthentic human, the mere reflex machine, is unable to experience empathy. In this story it is never clear whether Mercer*

is an invader from some other world. But he must be; in a sense all religious leaders are… but not from another planet as such. (1978)

THE WAR WITH THE FNOOLS *Galactic Outpost,* Spring 1964.

Well, once again we are invaded. And, humiliatingly, by a life form which is absurd. My colleague Tim Powers once said that Martians could invade us simply by putting on funny hats, and we'd never notice. It's a sort of low-budget invasion. I guess we're at the point where we can be amused by the idea of Earth being invaded. (And this is when they really zap you.) (1978)

A GAME OF UNCHANCE 11/9/63. *Amazing,* July 1964.

A carnival is feral; another carnival shows up and is pitted against the first one; and the antithetical interaction is preplanned in such a way that the first carnival wins. It's as if the two opposing forces that underlie all change in the universe are rigged; in favor of thanatos, the dark force, yin or strife, which is to say, the force of destruction. (1978)

PRECIOUS ARTIFACT 12/9/63. *Galaxy,* Oct 1964.

This story utilized a peculiar logic which I generally employ, which Professor Patricia Warrick pointed out to me. First you have Y. *Then you do a cybernetics flipflop and you have null-*Y. *Okay, now you reverse it again and have null-null-*Y. *Okay, the question is: Does null-null* Y *equal* Y^3*? Or is it a deepening of null-*Y*? In this story, what appears to be the case is* Y *but we find out the opposite is true (null-*Y*). But then* that *turns out not to be true, so are we back to* Y*? Professor Warrick says that my logic winds up with* Y *equals null-*Y. *I don't agree, but I'm not sure what I do wind up with. Whatever it is, in terms of logic, it is contained in this particular story. Either I've invented a whole new logic or, ahem, I'm not playing with a full deck.* (1978)

RETREAT SYNDROME 12/23/63. *Worlds of Tomorrow,* Jan 1965.

A TERRAN ODYSSEY 3/17/64 [previously unpublished; put together by PKD from sections of DR. BLOODMONEY].

YOUR APPOINTMENT WILL BE YESTERDAY 8/27/65. *Amazing,* Aug 1966. [Included in adapted form in PKD's novel COUNTER-CLOCK WORLD .]

HOLY QUARREL 9/13/65. *Worlds of Tomorrow,* May 1966.

NOT BY ITS COVER 9/21/65. *Famous Science Fiction,* Summer 1968.

Here I presented what used to be a wish on my part: that the Bible was true. Obviously, I was at a sort of halfway point between doubt and faith. Years later I'm still in that position; I'd like the Bible to be true, but - - well, maybe if it isn't we can make it so. But, alas, it's going to take plenty of work to do it. (1978)

RETURN MATCH 10/14/65. *Galaxy,* Feb 1967.

The theme of dangerous toys runs like a tattered thread throughout my writing. The dangerous disguised as the innocent… and what could be more innocent than a toy? This story makes me think of a set of huge speakers I looked at last week; they cost six thousand dollars and were larger than refrigerators. Our joke about them was that if you didn't go to the audio store to see them, they'd come to see you. (1978)

FAITH OF OUR FATHERS 1/17/66. *Dangerous Visions,* edited by Harlan Ellison, Garden City, 1967. [Hugo Award nominee]

The title is that of an old hymn. I think, with this story, I managed to offend everybody, which seemed at the time to be a good idea, but which I've regretted since. Communism, drugs, sex, God - - I put it all together, and it's been my impression since that when the roof fell in on me years later, this story was in some eerie way involved. (1976)

I don't advocate any of the ideas in Faith Of Our Fathers; *I don't, for example, claim that the Iron Curtain countries will win the cold war -- or morally ought to. One theme in the story, however, seems compelling to me, in view of recent experiments with hallucinogenic drugs: the theological experience, which so many who have taken LSD have reported. This appears to me to be a true new frontier; to a certain extent the religious experience can now be scientifically studied… and, what is more, may be*

viewed as part hallucination but containing other, real components. God, as a topic in science fiction, when it appeared at all, used to be treated polemically, as in OUT OF THE SILENT PLANET *. But I prefer to treat it as intellectually exciting. What if, through psychedelic drugs, the religious experience becomes commonplace in the life of intellectuals? The old atheism, which seemed to many of us — including me -- valid in terms of our experiences, or rather lack of experiences, would have to step momentarily aside. Science fiction, always probing what is about to be thought, become, must eventually tackle without preconceptions a future neo-mystical society in which theology constitutes as major a force as in the medieval period. This is not necessarily a backward step, because now these beliefs can be tested — forced to put up or shut up. I, myself, have no real beliefs about God; only my experience that He is present… subjectively, of course; but the inner realm is real too. And in a science fiction story one projects what has been a personal inner experience into a milieu; it becomes socially shared, hence discussable. The last word, however, on the subject of God may have already been said: in A.D. 840 by John Scotus Erigena at the court of the Frankish king Charles the Bald. "We do not know what God is. God Himself does not know what He is because He is not anything. Literally God* is not, *because He transcends being." Such a penetrating -- and Zen — mystical view, arrived at so long ago, will be hard to top; in my own experiences with psychedelic drugs I have had precious tiny illumination compared with Erigena.* (1966)

THE STORY TO END ALL STORIES FOR HARLAN ELLISON'S *ANTHOLOGY DANGEROUS VISIONS* *Niekas,* Fall 1968.

THE ELECTRIC ANT 12/4/68. *Fantasy & Science Fiction,* Oct 1969.

Again the theme: How much of what we call "reality" is actually out there or rather within our own head? The ending of this story has always frightened me… image of the rushing wind, the sound of emptiness. As if the character hears the final fate of the world itself. (1976)

CADBURY, THE BEAVER WHO LACKED written 12/71 [previously unpublished].

A LITTLE SOMETHING FOR US TEMPUNAUTS 2/13/73. *Final Stage*, edited by Edward L. Ferman and Barry N. Malzberg, New York, 1974.

In this story I felt a vast weariness over the space program, which had thrilled us so at the start - - especially the first lunar landing -- and then had been forgotten and virtually shutdown, a relic of history. I wondered, if time-travel became a "program" would it suffer the same fate? Or was there an even worse possibility latent in it, within the very nature of the paradoxes of time-travel? (1976)

The essence of the time-travel story is a confrontation of some sort, best of all by the person with himself. Really, this is the drama of much good fiction anyhow, except that in such a story as A Little Something For Us Tempunauts *the moment in which the man meets himself face-to-face permits an alienation that could not occur in any other variety of writing… alienation and not understanding, as one might expect. Addison Doug-One rides alive on the casket containing the corpse of Addison Doug-Two and knows it, knows he is now two persons -- he is split as in a physical schizophrenia. And his mind also is divided rather than united; he gains no insight from this event, neither of himself nor of that other Addison Doug who can no longer reason or problem-solve, but can only lie there inert and in darkness. This irony is just one of the enormous number of ironies possible in time-travel stories; naively, one would think that to travel into the future and return would lead to an increase in knowledge rather than to a loss of it. The three tempunauts go ahead in time, return, and are trapped, perhaps forever, by ironies and within ironies, the greatest one of which, I think, is their own bewilderment at their own actions. It is as if the increase in information brought about by such a technological achievement -- information as to exactly what is going to happen — decreases true understanding. Perhaps Addison Doug knows too much.*

In writing this story I felt a weary sadness of my own, and fell into the space (I should say time) that the characters are in, more so than usual. I felt a futility about futility - - there is nothing more defeating than a strong awareness of defeat, and as I wrote I realized that what for us remains merely a psychological problem — over-awareness of the likelihood of failing and the lethal feedback from this -- would for a time-traveler be instantly converted into an existential, physical horror-chamber. We, when

we're depressed, are fortunately imprisoned within our heads; once time-travel becomes a reality, however, this self-defeating psychological attitude could spell doom on a scale beyond calculation. Here again, science fiction allows a writer to transfer what usually is an internal problem into an external environment; he projects it in the form of a society, a planet, with everyone stuck, so to speak, in what formerly was one unique brain. I don't blame some readers for resenting this, because the brains of some of us are unpleasant places to be in… but on the other hand, what a valuable tool this is for us: to grasp that we do not all reatty see the universe in the same way, or, in a sense, the same universe at all. Addison Doug's dismal world suddenly spreads out and becomes the world of many people. But unlike a person reading a story, who can and will finish it and abolish his inclusion in the author's world, the people in this story are stuck fast forever. This is a tyranny not yet possible so readily… but, when you consider the power of the coercive propaganda apparatus of the modern-day state (when it's the enemy state we call it "brainwashing") you might wonder if it isn't a question of degree. Our glorious leaders of right now cannot trap us in extensions of their heads merely by lugging some old VW motor parts around, but the alarm of the characters in this story as to what is befalling them might rightly be our own alarm in a lesser way.

Addison Doug expresses the desire "to see no more summers." We should all object; no one should drag us, however subtly or for whatever evidently benign reasons, into that view or that desire: we should individually and collectively yearn to see as many summers as we can, even in the imperfect world we are living in now. (1973)

THE PRE-PERSONS 12/20/73. *Fantasy & Science Fiction,* Oct 1974.

In this I incurred the absolute hate of Joanna Russ who wrote me the nastiest letter I've ever received; at one point she said she usually offered to beat up people (she didn't use the word "people") who expressed opinions such as this. I admit that this story amounts to special pleading, and I am sorry to offend those who disagree with me about abortion on demand. I also got some unsigned hate mail, some of it not from individuals but from organizations promoting abortion on demand. Well, I have always managed to get myself into hot water. Sorry, people. But for the pre-person's sake I

am not sorry. I stand where I stand: "Hier steh' Ich; Ich kann nicht anders," as Martin Luther is supposed to have said. (1978)

THE EYE OF THE SYBIL 5/15/75 [previously unpublished].

THE DAY MR. COMPUTER FELL OUT OF ITS TREE written summer 1977 [previously unpublished].

THE EXIT DOOR LEADS IN 6/21/79. *Rolling Stone College Papers,* Fall 1979.

CHAINS OF AIR, WEB OF AETHER ("The Man Who Knew How to Lose") 7/9/79. *Stellar* #5, edited by Judy-Lynn del Rey, New York, 1980. [Included in PKD's novel THE DIVINE INVASION .]

STRANGE MEMORIES OF DEATH 3/27/80. *Interzone,* Summer 1984.

I HOPE I SHALL ARRIVE SOON (titled "Frozen Journey" in its magazine appearance; "I Hope I Shall Arrive Soon" is PKD's title) 4/24/80. *Playboy,* Dec 1980. *[Playboy* Award winner]

RAUTAVAARA'S CASE 5/13/80. *Omni,* Oct 1980.

THE ALIEN MIND *The Yuba City High Times,* 20 Feb 1981.

[The piece that follows appeared in THE BEST OF PHILIP K. DICK under the title, "Afterthought by the Author."]

The basic premise dominating my stories is that if I ever met an extraterrestrial intelligence (more commonly called a "creature from outer space") I would find I had more to say to it than to my next-door neighbor. What the people on my block do is bring in their newspaper and mail and drive off in their cars. They have no other outdoor habits except mowing their lawns. I went next door one time to check into the indoor habits. They were watching TV. Could you, in writing a sf novel, postulate a culture on these premises? Surely such a society doesn't exist, except maybe in my imagination. And there isn't much imagination involved.

The way out of living in the middle of an under-imaginative figment is to make contact, in your own mind, with other civilizations as yet unborn. You're doing the same thing when you read sf that I'm doing when I write it; your neighbor probably is as alien a life form to you as mine is to me. The stories in this collection are attempts at reception - - at listening to voices from another place, very far off, sounds quite faint but important. They only come late at night, when the background din and gabble of our world have faded out. When the newspapers have been read, the TV sets shut off, the cars parked in their various garages. Then, faintly, I hear voices from another star. (I clocked it once, and reception is best between 3:00 A.M. and 4:45 A.M.). Of course, I don't usually tell people this when they ask, "Say, where do you get your ideas?" I just say I don't know. It's safer.

Let's take these stories, then, and assume them to be (one) garbled receptions mixed with pure inventiveness, and (two) an alternative to dog food commercials in living color on TV. Both bypass what is immediately available. Both assumptions reach out as far as possible. Both sweep the void and return with something to report: that the universe is full of scheming, living, busy entities intent on their own pursuits, oblivious to the interests of others, alienated from their next-door neighbors, and, most of all, wondering who they can contact when all else fails. Wondering who lives as they do; wondering, maybe, about us.

The majority of these stories were written when my life was simpler and made sense. I could tell the difference between the real world and the world I wrote about. I used to dig in the garden, and there is nothing fantastic or ultradimensional about crab grass… unless you are an sf writer, in which case pretty soon you are viewing crab grass with suspicion. What are its real motives? And who sent it in the first place?

The question I always found myself asking was, What is it really? *It only looks like crab grass. That's what they want us to think it is. One day the crab grass suits will fall off and their true identity will be revealed. By then the Pentagon will be full of crab grass and it'll be too late. The crab grass, or what we took to be crab grass, will dictate terms. My earlier stories had such premises. Later, when my personal life became complicated and full of*

unfortunate convolutions, worries about crab grass got lost somewhere. I became educated to the fact that the greatest pain does not come zooming down from a distant planet, but up from the depths of the heart. Of course, both could happen; your wife and child could leave you, and you could be sitting alone in your empty house with nothing to live for, and in addition the Martians could bore through the roof and get you.

As to what the stories in this collection mean, I will not cite the usual copout that the story must speak for itself, but rather the copout that I don't really know. I mean, know above and beyond what it says, which is what any reader can extract from them. One time a whole class of kids wrote me about my story The Father-Thing, *and every kid wanted to know where I got my idea. That was easy, because it was based on childhood memories of my father; but later on, in rereading my answers, I noticed that I never said the same thing twice. With all intent at honesty, I gave each kid a different answer. I guess this is what makes a fiction writer. Give him six facts and he'll link them together first one way and then another, on and on until you forcibly stop him.*

Literary criticism, probably, should be left to the critics, since that's their job. One time I read in a distinguished book of criticism on sf that in my novel THE MAN IN THE HIGH CASTLE *the pin which the character Juliana used to hold her blouse together symbolized all that which held together the themes, ideas, and subplots of the novel itself - - which I hadn't known when I wrote that section. But what if Juliana, also not knowing it, had removed the pin? Would the novel have fallen apart? Or at least come open in the middle and exposed a whole lot of cleavage (which was why her boyfriend insisted she put on the pin in the first place)? I will do my best, though, to unpin these stories.*

The advantage of the story over the novel is that in the story you catch the protagonist at the climax of his life, but in the novel you've got to follow him from the day he was born to the day he dies (or nearly so). Open any novel at random and usually what is happening is either dull or unimportant. The only way to redeem this is through style. It is not what happened but how it is told. Pretty soon the professional novelist acquires

the skill of describing everything with style, and content vanishes. In a story, though, you can't get away with this. Something important has to happen. I think this is why gifted professional fiction writers wind up writing novels. Once their style is perfected, they have it made. Virginia Woolf, for instance, woundup writing about nothing at all.

In these stories, though, I remember that in every case *before I sat down to write, I had to have an idea. There had to be some real concept: an actual thing from which the story was built. It must always be possible to say, "Did you read the story* about *—" and then capsulize what it was about. If the essence ofsfis the idea (as Dr. Willis McNelly maintains), if indeed the idea is the true "hero," then the sf story probably remains the sf form par excellence, with the sf novel a fanning out, an expansion into all ramifications. Most of my own novels are expansions of earlier stories, or fusions of several stories -- superimpositions. The germ lay in the story; in a very real sense, that was its true distillate. And some of my best ideas, which meant the most to me, I could never manage to expand into novel form. They exist only as stories, despite all my efforts.* (1976)

The Collected Stories of Philip K. Dick

Volume l — The Short, Happy Life of the Brown Oxford

Volume 2 — We Can Remember It For You Wholesale

Volume 3 — Second Variety

Volume 4 — The Minority Report

Volume 5 — The Eye of the Sibyl

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